

JAMES EGGBEEN

The background of the entire image is a dramatic, dark landscape with jagged, dark mountains. A bright, glowing light source, possibly a sunset or sunrise, is visible behind the mountains on the right side. In the center of the image, a character wearing a long, white, hooded robe with a dark belt and a decorative gold-colored trim down the front stands holding a long, dark staff. The character's face is partially obscured by the hood. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and epic.

THE PRIEST



ORIGINS

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aethonbooks.com

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ALSO IN SERIES

THE PRIEST
THE DRAGON LORD
THE SORCERESS
THE HEALER

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CALLING FIRE

SULRAD

Sulrad huddled in the shadows of the common room of the small house he shared with his parents that stood alone beside a lightly traveled path to the woods that encroached on it. The chill evening wind whipped through the cracks in the walls and sucked the heat from his body, the full moon overhead doing little to chase away the darkness. None of that mattered. He'd been anticipating this night for half a moon. Tonight, there was nothing he desired more than fire and the light and heat it would bring. His fingers clutched the stub of a taper he had secretly stolen from his mother's drawer that was more yellow than white, evidence of the lack of care taken when his mother had rendered the fat before dipping the frayed wick into it. The wick itself had been woven from wool stolen from the blanket Sulrad slept beneath on the cold nights of winter. When he protested, his father had taken the strap to him and told him to be silently grateful he even had a blanket.

Fire would change that.

His thirteenth name day had come, and with it came the gift that would change his life. It stirred inside him, but had yet to awaken. Tonight would be the night. He just knew it.

Tonight, he would call fire and fire would make him a wizard.

Wizards were respected and showered with adoration, and dare he imagine, gold?

He would bring fire and the fire would bring him a better life.

He stared at the taper and called up the image of a flame. Not the raging fire that filled the hearth when there was wood enough, but the gentle, inviting flame of a candle that shed its light into the night to drive away evil spirits. The flame would be a digit in height, a tiny yellow tongue that would dance in the dark as if afraid to touch the wick that gave it life.

Words came to him, strange words, a phrase he had never heard spoken. He shivered. Those words held power. A gift from the gods. His lips moved silently, forming the alien words, his tongue unfamiliar with the shaping of them. "Incendio ignius," he mouthed.

Nothing happened, no sudden burst of light, no warming flame to light his home.

He stilled his heart as it thumped out its excitement, and he peered at the taper. The tip of the wick bore a faint orange glow, as if it had just been blown out and the wick was still hot.

"Incendio ignius." Sulrad spoke the words softly so as not to wake his parents. This time, as he uttered the words, something stirred inside his chest. Yes. These were more than just words. He'd touched something he had never touched before.

Magic.

The taper flared to life, momentarily blinding him by the sudden flash of light. He blinked, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the glare of the tiny flame that flickered before him. He couldn't believe it. He had done magic. Lit the taper with no more than words.

Could he do it again?

He leaned forward to blow out the taper, but something stopped him. The flame was intriguing, beckoning him to stare into it, taunting him with the secrets it might reveal if he had the ability to understand.

Sulrad stared at the flame, holding his eyes wide, afraid to blink lest he miss something important. His eyes grew dry, yet he didn't blink.

The flame danced. The tip of the tongue licked at the darkness as if it could wash away the shadows and replace them with light. A thread of smoke rose from the flame, the folds of gray twisting and turning as they vanished into the stillness of the night.

Sulrad blinked.

The smoke had begun to order itself. It snaked in the air, creating a globe of gray smoke, lit from within by the tiny flickering flame beneath. As it grew more and more solid, an image formed in its center. The image coalesced to form the outline of a girl, barely more than a child. She had long dark hair and a round face. Sulrad had never seen anyone like her. All the girls he knew were thin and gaunt, the outline of the bones evident in their faces. This girl was different. She peered outward from the smoke. The same full moon that shone on him illuminated a vast expanse of neatly trimmed lawn that led to a garden of flowers and hedges. Behind her was a brick wall bearing a sigil and an open window. He'd seen that before in town on festival days. She was staring off into the air as if looking over her shoulder. Then she gasped and looked right at him. "Who are you?" The words came to him almost as if she had spoken aloud.

"I'm called Sulrad."

"How can you see me?" she asked. "Are you a wizard?"

"I only just called fire. Who are you? Where are you? Are you a wizard?" He had so many questions. Surely here was someone who commanded magic. Someone who could teach him how to become a wizard.

"I'm not going to tell you who I am. Not until we know each other better." The girl looked off to the side with an angry look. "I'm just talking. It's not hurting anyone." She paused, then continued. "It's just fire." She turned back to Sulrad. "I have to go."

"Don't go. You didn't tell me your name."

"That's right. I didn't." She reached for something and cast it at Sulrad.

The image vanished.

The globe disintegrated with a pop and the spindly thread of smoke resumed its climb toward the ceiling.

Sulrad stared at the smoke. What had just happened? Who was the girl? She was well-fed. The cut of her clothes was precise, her garments layered and clean. Could she be a royal? Was that why she had dismissed him? Did she fear him? He had to talk to her. She was the only person he knew who had magic.

He concentrated on the smoke, trying to entice the image back into existence.

The smoke wavered once more, creating the sphere, but there was no girl, only walls of stone that he could not break through. Had it been a fluke? Had he imagined her?

"What are you doing?"

His mother, Toval, appeared as if from nowhere. Her face was set in a scowl. The scarf she wore to bed was askew on her head, with strands of her black hair protruding at odd angles. She bore a spoon in her hand. The one carved from the branch of the tree that had once grown behind the house that had been struck down by lightning one stormy night. His father had carved the spoon from the wood of that tree, claiming it was a gift from Ran and meant for a special purpose. That spoon was not used for cooking. It was reserved for what his father called correction.

His heart raced at the sight of it.

He held himself perfectly still. Any attempt to avoid what was coming would only make matters worse.

The spoon flashed out, smacking Sulrad on the back of the hand.

He jerked at the pain, the motion extinguishing the flame, plunging him into darkness. He'd flinched. He'd tried not to, but it hurt too much. His mother was angrier than usual tonight. Was it the fire?

"Get back to your pallet and stop this foolishness," she said. "Do you want to burn down the only home we have?"

This time, the spoon caught him on the head.

It hurt. It made him feel dizzy. He should have held still, but he hadn't. He shoved the taper into his pocket and crawled for his pallet beside the hearth, hoping Toval had spent her anger, fearful that she had not.

He drew the blanket over himself. Doubling it up around this head in the hopes that if Toval was not yet finished with her admonition, the blanket would prevent him from sporting bruises to accuse him of his misdeeds. He controlled his breathing, trying to calm himself. "Yes, Mother," he muttered. Sometimes accepting her admonition worked to soothe her. If not, would she continue to beat him or summon his father?

"What's happening?" Merten's voice was filled with sleep, but that would not stop him should he choose to take up the cause. Merten never used the spoon. No, that was reserved for Toval. Merten used the strap or a switch. Sulrad was certain that Merten enjoyed the sounds they made when they struck his naked flesh. He held his breath.

"Your son," Toval said, "is wasting perfectly good tapers and trying to burn our home down."

"Remind me to beat him in the morning. I'm too tired to do it now."



Sulrad slept fitfully, anticipating the beating that had been promised in the morning. In the gloom just before dawn, he rose. It was too early for his parents to be awake. They were not the type to waste a taper on an early riser.

Sulrad took a battered and rusted tin from the shelf that contained the ground oats he and his father had gleaned from the fields after the harvesters departed. On the last day of foraging, one of the landowner's men had caught them and beat them, lashing out with his staff to leave bruises on Sulrad and his father both. Merten had cowered like a dog before the men, like a frightened dog, begging for mercy even as Sulrad stood silent and took his beating like a man. Afterwards, Merten had made it into a lesson for Sulrad about the sin of gluttony and how one should never eat more than was absolutely necessary, but Sulrad knew better. Merten had been shamed in front of his son and took his frustration out on Sulrad, justifying it as a lesson in piety, espousing the virtues of poverty and how it brought a man close to the spirit that was one with everything. Ran, he explained, judged all and rewarded the faithful for their acts. No doubt, on this occasion, they had taken more than was their due, and it was only right that they had been punished.

"If Ran rewards the faithful," Sulrad had asked, "then why are we always hungry?"

The rage that had been leveled at Sulrad at that simple request was enough to teach him never again to question his father's words about Ran. Not when Merten carved the branch of a dead tree into the crude image of a wizened old man and placed it on the mantel, proclaiming that Ran now watched over the family and their every move, not when Merten droned on unendingly giving thanks for a meal barely able to quell the grumbling in Sulrad's stomach, not even when Merten forced Sulrad to his knees before the misshapen piece of wood and whipped him with a belt as punishment for the sins of the flesh. Merten was a true

believer, even if Sulrad had grave doubts that one as powerful and all-knowing as Ran cared one whit what he or his family did.

His only hope to avoid another beating was to atone for his sins. In the past, when he had prepared the morning meal before Merten and Toval awoke, he had been able to dodge a beating. If not, then he would take his beating like a man and hide the pain.

A rooster crowed as the pre-dawn light gave it sight. Sulrad had the meager fire lit, and the gruel was bubbling nicely when he noticed something was amiss. Usually, Toval was awake first, his mother dutifully preparing the morning meal for his father, but today, she was nowhere to be found and Merten was still asleep, even as the sun broached the horizon, sending the full light of its glory to chase away the shadows.

"Father?" Sulrad knelt beside Merten and gently shook him. "Morning meal is ready."

Merten rolled over, his face set in a scowl as he blinked the sleep from his eyes. "I'm not eating."

"But I've prepared the morning meal, ground oats, just as you like, with a bit of honey. I was able to scrape some from the jar."

"I told you I'm not eating. Don't you hear so well?" Merten turned his back on Sulrad and pulled the blanket tighter around him.

"Where's Mother?" Sulrad asked.

"While you cowered beneath your blanket, she left. She's off to live with her sister. Said we weren't fit to be around any longer."

"Gone? Why?"

"Why?" Marten spun around and lurched to his feet. He grabbed Sulrad by the shirt and lifted him from the ground. "You have to ask me why? After that stunt you pulled last night? What were you thinking?"

Sulrad drew a breath to answer but decided this was one of those times where any response would only enrage his father.

"I suppose you think you're some sort of wizard, now? That we're going to bow down to you and treat you like your excrement don't stink?"

"No."

"Wizardry is a sin worse than gluttony, greed, or the rest. How do you think Ran will reward you for your acts?" he screamed.

Before Sulrad could answer, Merten shoved him to his knees and reached for the leather strap. As the strap struck him again and again, Sulrad prayed that the blows would stop, that the magic would grow strong in him and give him an avenue of escape. He offered his prayer not to Ran, but to whatever spirit the great wizards paid homage to. But even that felt hollow, as if no one truly cared what befell one such as him.

UNLOVABLE CHILD

SULRAD

It had been days since Toval ran off, but the welts on Sulrad's legs and back were still tender and embarrassing, the angry red proclaiming his unworthiness to anyone who might catch a glimpse. The strong scent of lye bit at his nose even as the powerful soap burned the flesh from his hands. His skin was permanently raw and red, not only from washing clothes but from scrubbing the floor with steaming hot water every morning. He almost didn't mind. It gave him time to think about the girl he'd seen in the fire. He'd tried to forget her, put her out of his mind, but he couldn't. Would she befriend him if he could control his magic? He had to find out, try to reach her once more, but not now. Not here. Not where Merten might see. He bent his back to his task. It was his task now. Merten had made that clear.

"You run her off — you take her place." Merten peeled off his sweat-stained shirt and tossed it in the washbasin. He wrestled with his boots and drew off his stockings, tossing the foul-smelling rags in with the shirt. "See that you get them clean."

"When is she coming home?" Sulrad kept his face turned toward his work. Eye contact with Merten seemed only to enrage him since Toval had run off.

"She's not coming back. Says you're an abomination. Says you're not fit to be around. Who could blame her? Who could love someone who toys with the dark arts with no care for the souls around him? I'll put you out myself if you don't earn your keep. Ran is vengeful, but he does have mercy. Keep scrubbing, and maybe one day, he'll see fit to bless you once again."

"I'll try, Father."

Merten leveled a kick at Sulrad's backside, but without his boot, it was only half-hearted and Sulrad managed to stay on his knees. "Do more than try."

"Yes, Father." The boy attacked the floor with renewed vigor, whether he believed in Ran's mercy or not.

"Hoy! Anyone home?" a voice called from the doorway.

"Come in and enjoy Ran's blessing," Merten answered.

The woman who stepped into the room was tall and thin and had shortly cropped hair. Her resemblance to Sulrad's mother always gave Sulrad pause, even though his mother's sister only visited on rare occasions, usually only to complain about Toval's poor choice of a bond-mate.

"Welcome, Calura. Have you brought news of my mother?" Sulrad asked.

"You have no mother." Calura worked up a mouthful of spittle and launched it at Sulrad before continuing. "You lost your mother when you made a pact with the demons of magic. I hope it was worth it."

Sulrad wiped the spittle from his face. "I made no pact with anyone." He stood. "How is she? Even if she cares not for me, I care for her."

"You do, do you? Well, she don't care for you."

Calura turned to Merten. "You neither. What sort of man lets his own son deal in the dark arts? I thought you was a pious man. How could you let this happen?"

"What do you expect me to do?" Merten demanded. "Whip it out of him?"

“Better dead with your soul intact than to lose it to the demons of darkness.”

“Ran may yet show mercy toward my son.” The words sounded hollow.

“No matter,” Calura said. “I’ve come for her things.”

Merten stepped between Calura and the dresser. “You’re not taking anything. She’ll see that she was wrong. She always does. Give her a bit of time and she’ll come running back home. It’s not like she hasn’t done this before.”

“You really want to do this?” Calura asked. “You going to make me get my man and come all the way back here?”

“You’re not taking anything.” Merten reached for a knife from the table. “I mean it.”

Calura stood her ground for a handful of heartbeats, then raised her hands and stepped back. “Suit yourself. But, when I return, you will have put this silly notion out of your head. She’s not coming back.” She turned and spat at Sulrad once more. “Never.”



The next morning while Merten was out gathering wood and Sulrad was busy scrubbing the floors, the door flew open without so much as a knock. Sulrad froze, dripping brush in hand. Framed in the doorway stood a man dressed in a sleeveless leather vest with bands around his biceps. His light blond hair was tied back in a queue that reached halfway down his back. Bands of gold and silver secured the hair in place.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay out of the way.” The man stepped inside and positioned himself beside the open door. His hand went to the hilt of a knife that was easily as long as Sulrad’s forearm. Sulrad recognized the man as one of his mother’s relatives. That side of the family had shunned them for as long as he could remember. His

heart beat faster. If his mother's relative were here, she might be here as well. He held his breath, waiting.

He was right. His mother walked through the door, brushing aside the large man.

"Ma! You're back."

He rushed toward her, but the man stepped into his path.

"No, she's not." He drew his knife and folded his arms across his massive chest. The blade came to rest against a straining bicep.

"Don't touch him, Purn," Toval said. "He may be in league with the demons of darkness, but he's still my son."

It heartened Sulrad that his mother was sticking up for him. Perhaps she had changed her mind, accepted what he had become. Maybe there was still hope.

"Why'd you bring me, then?" Purn asked.

"In case Merten puts up a fight," Toval said. "He's not my blood, and he's not telling me how to live my life. He and the boy can worship that foolish hunk of wood if they want, but not me. Not anymore."

"If you hurry, we can be gone before he gets back," Purn said.

"I'll take my time and you'll stand there, or do I need to tell Calura you don't listen?"

"I listen, just don't take orders." The big man sheathed his knife and stepped back beside the door. "Get what you came for and let's be gone. I don't need no trouble, not that I can't handle it. I just don't need it."

"Merten won't be trouble," Toval said. "What sort of man puts his faith in a hunk of wood he carved himself?"

As if the mention of his name had summoned him, Merten strode through the door. He clutched the hatchet in his hand he had been using to chop wood for the fire. Sulrad drew a breath. Would Merten's arrival help calm his mother's ire or would it inflame it? Merten and Toval often argued, especially about Ran, but they always made up.

Why should this time be any different? They would settle things between them and Toval would stay.

"What's going on here?" Merten demanded.

"We don't need any trouble from you." Purn reached for his knife. "The lady is just picking up what rightly belongs to her, and then we'll be on our way."

"She's not your lady; she's my woman." Merten raised the hatchet and took a step toward the man.

Sulrad tensed and backed away. He wanted no part of this fight.

Purn was simply there to scare Merten. That was the reason he gave, but Sulrad knew violence could erupt at the slightest thing. He hoped there would be no bloodshed. His mother had already scolded him once in that regard.

"Don't make me hurt you, little man," Purn said. He was a head taller than Merten.

"Hurt me?" Merten shifted his weight onto his hind foot and drew the hatchet back. "Get out of my house, you snutch." He threw the hatchet at Purn's chest.

Purn hopped backwards.

The hatchet sliced through his vest and opened a gash in his chest.

Purn's hand went to his chest. For a moment, Sulrad thought the big man had been beaten, but he raised his hand to his lips, licked his own blood from it, and smiled. He raised his knife, taking a step toward Merten. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Sulrad froze. He wanted to rush to save his father, but he knew that would only make matters worse. Trying to intervene between Merten and Toval when they fought usually ended with him being beaten. If the man killed his father, who would take care of him? Toval had made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him. Was he about to become homeless, orphaned, destitute?

Before he could decide what to do, his mother intervened.

"Don't kill him," she said. "Someone has to take care of the boy and it isn't going to be me."

"I could take them both out," Purn said. "Save you trouble in the long run."

"No. I told you. Don't kill anyone. I just want this over."

"As you wish." Purn tossed the knife in the air, caught it by the blade, and hurled it at Merten.

The blade flew through the air with agonizing slowness, tumbling on its axis, the hilt and blade exchanging places. The hilt slammed into Merten's head, making a wet sound.

Sulrad let out a sigh of relief as Merten wobbled and collapsed onto the floor.

"Purn!" Toval threw him a look that could have curdled milk.

"He's alive," Purn said. "Going to have a whale of a headache when he wakes up, but he's alive."

"Get over here and make yourself useful, then." Toval opened a drawer and removed the few items of clothes she owned, handing them to Purn.

"Out. I want to have a word with my son," she said.

Purn said, "Don't be long. I'm not waiting all afternoon in the hot sun for you."

"Do as you're told and you won't have to."

Sulrad realized that this might be the last time he saw Toval. He had to try. Show her that he wasn't evil. He took a step toward her. "Mother. Please."

Toval held her hands out as if to ward him off.

His heart sank.

"I'll not embrace you," she said. Instead, she knelt down and touched Merten's face. "Your da is going to wake soon. When he does, he's going to be mad. Best you weren't here."

She stood up and straightened her clothes. Tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks. "I, I" She shook her head and turned toward the door. "I could almost, but no."

As she stepped out into the midday sun, Sulrad was almost certain he heard her whisper, "I love you," but the sound of the afternoon breeze carried her words away with her.

Merten mumbled from the floor where he lay. "They gone?"

"They're gone." Sulrad knelt beside his father and put his hand on the man's shoulder. It shook.

"Get off me."

"I was just trying to help."

"You want to help?" Merten touched the rising bump on this side of his head. He sounded exhausted. "Leave this notion of magic aside and get straight with Ran."

"I'll try."

Even as he spoke the words, Sulrad knew he would not.

EVER VIGILANT

SULRAD

A moon had passed since Toval left Sulrad alone with his father. At first, he believed she would return soon. How many times had he rushed out to the yard and started down the narrow path that led to the nearby town, thinking she was standing there waiting for him? How often had he wandered into the nearby woods thinking that she had just popped out to search for berries to make the jam he so enjoyed. But as each day passed and she did not return, he had fallen into a routine. Up at dawn. Cook gruel for himself and his father. Wash up. Clean the hearth. Forage for whatever he could find in the woods and along the roadways near the town.

He had just finished washing when he noticed that an odd bit of charred wood had failed to burn the night before, yet it still glowed. Sulrad's gaze was drawn to that one tiny piece that seemed to cling to life as if refusing to give up the fire that had engulfed it. Was it truly alight or was he just imagining it? Could he use it to power his newly awakened magic or did it require a full flame? Was it the heat, or the light, or something else that drove the magic?

He imagined that piece of wood bursting into flame.

Since the night Toval left, he had not attempted to bring forth fire, but it still called to him and drew his idle

thoughts to the possibility. Was he a wizard? What about the girl? Could he contact her again?

He extended a finger toward that ember, encouraging it back to life. A tingling arose in his chest, flashed down his arm, and rushed out his extended finger.

A small flame burst from the smoldering ember.

He'd done it again.

"Show her to me," he whispered.

The smoke wafted from the small flame leisurely making its way up the chimney.

"Show me the girl." He tried to recall her image. When he had first seen her, it was as if her memory had been burned into his brain, but over time, that image had faded until he wasn't certain he recalled what she looked like.

The smoke began to twist on its way up the chimney like a wandering river. At first, it appeared as if nothing was happening, but gradually, the twisting and turning of the smoke took on an order. Threads of grey turned and wrapped themselves into a ball about the size of an apple, the smoke accumulating inside until it was opaque.

Sulrad leaned closer. "Where are you?"

The smooth globe of smoke began to wobble as it took on the form of a woman's head. Her hair was curly and fell over her shoulders. Her face round, her eyes wide.

As the image solidified, it took on color, became more lifelike.

"Can you see me?" Sulrad asked. He'd done it. He reached her. Maybe this time they would have time to speak at length. There were so many questions he wanted to ask her.

The image opened its eyes. "You again? Where have you been? I've been seeking you."

"I've been busy."

"Tonight. Seek me tonight. Now is not a good time," she said.

"How will I find you?"

"How did you find me now?"

"I don't know. I just did."

"Then do it again." Her image turned to the side and frowned. "I have to go."

"Wait." Sulrad stretched out his hand, but the image in the smoke had already vanished, leaving nothing but a small fire burning in the hearth, a single thread of smoke rushing up the chimney.

"Sulrad!" Merten's hand rapped Sulrad on the head.

"Sorry, Father," he muttered, hoping his apology sounded sincere enough to damp his father's ire.

"I see you need constant watching. You can't seem to take your eyes off that smoldering piece of wood." Merten blew out the flame and retrieved the chunk of wood that had caught Sulrad's attention. It was the size of his palm, charred pine, the stub of a branch that ended in a knot.

He tapped it against the floor, knocking the larger charred bits free. He hefted it in his hand. "This is a nice piece of wood, isn't it? Draws the eye, doesn't it? This will do nicely."

"For what?" Sulrad asked.

"To keep an eye on you. I can't have you sneaking off to do magic, and I can't keep my eye on you every moment of the day. Fetch me my carving knife."

Sulrad did as asked, retrieving the knife Merten used to carve his tiny animal figures while he sat by the fire. When Merten was engaged in his carving, he had no time to berate his son, and that gave Sulrad a tiny bit of hope that it might yet be a good day.

"Here you go, Father." He held out the knife, his fingers pinched tight to the cold iron, and waited for his father to acknowledge before releasing it. Merten was strict about the proper protocol for handling a knife. He'd often berated Sulrad for being careless with a blade, instilling a healthy respect for the cold iron into his son with the leather strap that hung beside the fireplace.

Sulrad watched his father repeatedly plunge the blade into the charred wood. Bits of black fell away. "What are you making?"

Merten didn't look up. "It's for you."

"For me? Not for coin?"

"It's clear to me you need reminding that the dark arts are evil. This will remind you that you are never alone." Merten's tongue slipped from between his lips as he whittled at the gnarled piece of wood. He had removed the charred surface and was starting to dig into the grain.

It was amazing to Sulrad how his father had such a feel for the wood. Some days he would sit transfixed as Merten worked and the figure came into being under his steady hand. He often told Sulrad that the figure had been inside the wood all along and that he simply cut away the bits that obscured it. Sulrad wasn't certain he believed that. It was more likely that Merten forced his imagination on the wood.

The image was gradually revealed. Each movement of the short, sharp blade sliced away another sliver to reveal the shape of an old man.

Sulrad's heart sank. Another statue of Ran? Where was this one going to be placed? Was he going to be forced to bow and scrape before it as he was the one that rested on the mantel? At least this one didn't have such an angry scowl. It looked as if the old man were sitting on a rock staring off in the distance.

The figure was barely more than roughed out when Merten placed it on the mantel. He rummaged through a bin that sat beside the hearth and contained bits of wood and leather that he used to craft the small toys he sold in the market for copper. Finding a strap of old leather, he sliced a narrow cord from it and tied it around the neck of the statue.

"Come here, boy." Merten held out the statue of the gnarled old man.

Sulrad took a halting step toward his father. He did not want to get too close but knew that things would not go well if he disobeyed.

"Lean down."

Sulrad did as told, feeling the rough hands of his father fasten the thong around his neck.

"That's it. Now Ran can watch over you when I'm not around. You know he is ever vigilant, now you have a reminder of it."

"Yes, Father." Sulrad fingered the tiny carving, feeling how the grain formed the body of the old man and how the knots in the wood were clearly a representation of the man's eyes. Sulrad shivered. Maybe his father was right, maybe Ran did watch over him. But why did he let bad things happen to them? Why had he let Toval leave?

"Go now. Go get me some wood. Find something nice, dry but not brittle or dry-rotted. Soft but tough. You know what I want."

Sulrad tugged at the leather thong around his neck. "Yes, Father."

"And don't take that off. I'll know if you do, and so will Ran."

"Yes, Father. I'll go fetch more wood for you."

"Don't bring me any of that green wood. It needs to be dry."

"Yes, Father."

Sulrad retrieved the canvas bag he used to collect wood for the fire. Glad for any excuse to get away from his father, he slung the bag over his shoulder and headed for the woods. It was good to have some time away, if only for the morning. He had plans for his time away.

He followed the path as it wound its way over the gentle hill that led to the woods. The grass was high, almost up to his knees, heavy with seed. Harvest would soon be upon them. No doubt Merten would pledge both of them to help bring in the grain that covered the nearby hills like a

golden blanket. It was hard work, but honest, and if the harvest was good, Sulrad and Merten would earn enough coin to keep them in salt and flour for an entire season.

The grass gave way to brush as if it feared to enter the stand of trees. Low foliage yielded to ferns and broad-leaved flowers as the woods thickened. Not long after entering, the path split. Sulrad took the path to the left where he knew of a small clearing where a tree had fallen the previous summer. The tree had shattered as it fell, leaving a broken trunk with shards of wood scattered about. It would be just perfect for his needs.

Sulrad found the tree just where he remembered it. The trunk was broken and jagged, and it was easy to slice off shavings of wood for kindling. There was even a piece large enough for Merten to carve into a cat, or a horse, the sort of figure that earned a copper or even two in one of the larger towns.

He filled his bag with wood, carefully setting aside any slivers of kindling that looked especially dry. When his bag was full, he shrugged it off his shoulder and plopped himself down on the ground.

He arranged the kindling carefully, forming a neat pile with ample room for air to enter and escape.

He settled in front of the kindling and closed his eyes, imagining fire. Just a spark would be all that was necessary. Surely he could do that. He visualized the flame, recalling what it had felt like when he lit the candle.

He opened his eyes.

A spark glowed at the end of a sliver of wood and quickly extinguished itself. No flame caught. The kindling was too thick. He had been in too much of a hurry. He knew better. He retrieved a flat piece of kindling and shaved it with his knife. He let the blade follow the grain as it sliced off thin, hair-like slivers of wood that landed in the pile of kindling like fine curls cut from the head of a child.

When he had enough, Sulrad closed his eyes once more. As he imagined fire, he felt a warmth in his chest, for just the briefest of moments before the fire caught. This time, his tiny sparks gave rise to the barest hint of a flame that with gentle coaxing grew into a small fire. The popping of the wood as it burned sent shivers up his spine.

Would it work?

It had to.

What sort of wizard couldn't repeat a spell he had already mastered? How was he ever going to gain the respect and admiration of the townsfolk who looked down their noses at him? It would work. He was sure of it. He sat back and tried to relax, let his gaze be transfixed by the fire, the dancing flames calling to him as if they were alive.

He let his mind wander. What did the flames have to say to him? Would they reveal her once again? He needed to concentrate and bring up the image he saw before.

Sulrad tried to recall the room where he had seen the girl. The block wall formed of carved stone bore a banner with a sigil embroidered on it. He recalled now. It was the crest of Baron Reik. She was a royal, then.

He concentrated. The smoke from the fire coalesced once more into a sphere that grew ever more distinct. Where was the girl? The room was empty. A large bed took up much of the room. Chests of drawers expertly crafted stood on either side of the bed as if standing guard. The canopy over the bed was deep red, the color of freshly spilled blood. Intricate designs of flowers and leaves had been embroidered along it in gold. Sulrad wondered at the richness of it. How many days had someone painstakingly stitched it? Why take such time for something that was never even touched?

He scanned the room. Leading to a separate chamber, a door stood open. It beckoned to him as if calling his name.

He followed it and peered into the room. Sulrad drew back in shock. It was a bathing chamber! A large tub had

been built into the floor and filled with steaming water. Faint waves of mist rose from its surface, filling the room. A girl stood by the water. She wore a short robe tied in the middle. Her hair was dark and wet as it fell about her shoulders. She turned toward him and her eyes went wide.

"You again? Your timing is terrible."

"Forgive me. I will try again another time."

"No. Don't go." She settled down on the edge of the tub, placing her feet into the water. "Where are you?" she asked.

"In the woods."

"Which woods?"

Sulrad paused. He'd only known one woods. It was the woods that bordered on the land where his home had been built. He knew the land belonged to the baron. The city was called Frostan. That much he knew, and the woods were north of the city. A day's walk.

"In Frostan?"

"Frostan? At least you're not half a world away."

"You're in Frostan, then?" he asked.

"When we know each other better." She pulled her robe tighter as if she were cold. "I have to go." She reached down, dipped a hand into the water, and splashed it at him.

The fire sizzled and went out.

Sulrad's head throbbed as he sat staring at the now wet and dead fire. How had she done that? Who was she? He felt his face go hot. He'd been caught peering in on a maiden in her bath. If Merten learned of such a sin, there would be no stopping the beating. Chastity was almost as important to Merten as piety.

He shivered at the thought.

Who was going to tell Merten?

Ran?

Surely not.

As if in warning, the statue at his throat scratched at his skin.

UNDER COVER

GARLATH

In the wizard's city of Amedon late one afternoon, Garlath pored over the records of the students he would be responsible for. This was to be his first summer in charge of students, having only recently been awarded the rank of full wizard. He looked forward to the task with some trepidation. He had taken longer than most to reach Amedon, spending three summers on his way across the land, letting his curiosity lead him where he wished. As such, he was in great demand, for he could travel by magic almost anywhere. It made him proud to be the one they sought whenever word came of trouble brewing across the land. He almost wished he could make traveling his full-time occupation.

Truth be told, he was much more comfortable on the road than stuck behind the massive stone walls of Amedon with their eons of accumulated dust and knowledge. The constant encroachment of young wizards on his sense of magic was sometimes more than he could bear. Young wizards were encouraged to travel the lands and learn to shield their magic before being permitted to enter Amedon, but not all of them were successful. When a young wizard touched his magic, it leaked, spilling out in uncontrolled waves that grated on the nerves of every wizard for leagues

around. The policy of having young wizards travel the land was meant to prevent anyone from entering before he was ready. Yet every summer they came, the untrained who managed to survive the journey but had yet to develop full control of their magic. They were, as a rule, not permitted to cast any spells unless under the supervision of a senior wizard, one who was adept at shields, but even so, that policy failed to stop them from surreptitiously attempting magic when they thought no one was looking. It seemed that the only way to escape the constant din was to find a place where few wizards congregated.

The rap on his door caught him off guard. Usually, he knew when someone approached. The spells he was permitted as a full wizard should have warned him of someone approaching, unless that someone was a wizard with much more experience and power than most.

"Come in, Alwroth," Garlath said.

The door opened to a white-haired wizard who was slender and tall and showed many of the signs of age, yet carried himself like a man just entering his prime. Garlath had never been able to determine how old the more senior wizards were. Most of them appeared to be centuries old. The craft of wizardry tended to expend one's life force quickly. For all he knew, the senior wizard could be a man only a few summers older than he himself.

"Glad to see you have kept your spells up." Alwroth took a seat across from Garlath. "How do you like being a full wizard? Ready for your class?"

"It's fine. I'm sure the students will be fine. Everything is just fine," Garlath said. He knew the wizard was not a truth teller. They were uncommon, and no one with that skill had ever turned out to have magic as well. He was certain he could get away with a small white lie.

"I hope you are not too invested in this position yet. Seems we have a problem in a place you know, a place to which you can travel by magic." The wizard paused. "And

only you. Seems a bit of a backwater out-of-the-way land. Not the sort of place most wizards ever visit."

"And you want me to go see what's going on?"

"Yes. Another of our own was killed there last evening. Burned alive, but not before he released his spirit animal to seek us out and demand vengeance. It seems the baron had a charm that can defeat the magic of a wizard while he tortures and kills him. We must not let this continue."

"This place," Garlath said. "It has a name?"

"Frostan."

Garlath searched his memory. The name sounded familiar, but without something to anchor his attention, traveling there by magic was out of the question. A wizard who entered the void without a clear idea of where he wished to exit might never reappear. The void consumed the unwary like a hungry monster waiting for the chance to devour anyone who failed to show it the proper respect. What if he couldn't recall Frostan? Was he going to be sent there afoot? Perhaps he could recall somewhere close by and travel overland from there. But wait. There was one memory. Something about a barmaid. Garlath reached for the specifics.

There.

Yes. It was a barmaid. He remembered the town now. Not much more than a second-rate fiefdom with a baron who had been granted the land of a lesser noble. The castle was rather small and in a state of disrepair from what he recalled. They had just received a new baron. Reik? Was that his name? He was the cousin of the king. Some said he had a strong claim to the throne, maybe even stronger than the king's own son due to the king's indiscretion in marrying out of the line of succession.

"I recall the place. It's off the beaten path. Not much of a fiefdom, if you ask me. Do you know anything more than a wizard was murdered there?"

Alwroth shook his head. "Nothing. That's why we need to find out what's happening. We can't have wizards being killed like common thieves, now, can we? What would happen to all the young boys who are making their way to Amedon if wizards became fair game?"

"Would you like me to remove the threat or simply report back?" Garlath asked. Quiet work was not really the sort of thing he was suited to, but he would do it if asked.

"Report back," Alwroth said. "That is, unless your immediate safety is threatened. Then do what you must. This involves the baron and we don't want to be seen interfering in the affairs of royalty."

"Certainly not. When do you want me to go?"

The ancient wizard stood and nodded to the stone wall behind Garlath. "No time like the present. I assume you know the way?"

"I do. Met a barmaid there who showed me a great time. How could I forget?"

Alwroth shook his head slowly. "Some days I wonder what things will be like when your lot run the council. It's inevitable, I suppose, but the thought of it fills me with dread. I truly wish you were a bit more settled. Like the rest of the wizards who make their way here. It seems as if you may not be cut from the same cloth as most."

"Thank goodness for that." Garlath closed his eyes and imagined the inn where he had met that particular barmaid. At first, the image was unclear. He'd met so many people in so many places, even his recollection was growing fuzzy. He'd need to spend more time revisiting a few nearby towns, lest he lose his edge. When the mighty ones no longer needed his particular talent, he would be locked away in some dusty old study in some dusty old tower in the dusty old city of Amedon.

There.

He had it.

The image formed in his mind. An inn. A bit run down. Roof sloping toward the livery, the door painted green long ago now chipped and faded. And inside, tables of rough-hewn lumber surrounded by low benches made from the same wood, and in the kitchen, a barmaid that knew how to keep a man's interest.

The shimmering portal opened before him.

"Take care, young wizard," Alwroth said as Garlath stepped through the portal and into the empty alleyway beside the inn.



After half a moon digging into the goings on, Garlath returned to Amedon. His time in Frostan had been a waste, but it had allowed him to get out of Amedon and away from his students, if only for a time. Maybe he could make it more permanent. The din of new students performing magic without proper shielding was already starting to get on his nerves, and the wizard who had temporarily taken over his charges looked haggard and worn and eager to hand them back. Bringing first summer wizards into the fold was a lot more trouble than it appeared.

Garlath smiled, glad it was not only him who found the task daunting and unrewarding.

The spell he had placed on his door tingled, signaling that someone was standing just outside. He flicked his fingers in its direction and muttered the words to open the door. "Patentibus."

The door swung open to reveal a wizard, hand raised, no doubt preparing to rap. He wore a cloaking spell, but Garlath had seen right through it. He would wonder how a young wizard like Garlath was able to detect his presence. Good. Let him chew on that for a while.

"I see you've been polishing your spell work," Alwroth said.

"Precious little else to do in that backwater town you sent me to."

"Right. Straight to business. No time for pleasantries, is that it?"

"No, Mighty One, it's just that I've been a bit preoccupied."

"Drop the formalities. It's just the two of us. With what were you preoccupied?"

"Surviving. That place is a nightmare. Baron Reik," Garlath explained. "He's the ruler of Frostan. This first wizard he dispatched was Phomor. The baron asked that fool Phomor to influence the sex of his child. Phomor had little knowledge of such spells and employed one that appears to have been somewhat, shall we say, overambitious? That one was almost justified. Lately, the baron has taken to executing any who exhibit any power at all. From what I can discern, it is connected to his daughter, who he is planning to bring back to court."

"A daughter, you say? The one who was supposed to be born a boy?"

"Yes. And prior to her birth, she was under the influence of a spell that Phomor had no business casting."

"She's normal?" Alwroth asked. "No extra limbs, no webbed feet, cleft palate?"

"Not that I was able to discern. From what I gather, she is the image of her mother. The baron hates her because of it. Says she reminds him of all he's lost."

"That's not good. Were you able to determine the effects of the spell?"

Garlath drew a breath. He hated to admit his failure, but the magic in Frostan was strange and muddled. It had taken all he could muster to raise even the simplest spells, and those had not proven to be very effective.

"No, and I fear we won't. Not for quite some time. If only I knew what sort of spell Phomor had attempted. Perhaps then I could determine what we need to keep an eye out for."

The elder wizard fiddled with his robe, a habit Garlath had come to recognize meant he was about to deliver some spectacularly bad news.

"I want you to go back," Alwroth said. "Keep an eye on things. See if you can't find out what else Phomor did."

"There is something bothering me about Frostan," Garlath admitted.

Alwroth nodded but remained silent.

"There is a religion that has sprung up around town," Garlath said. "Some minor deity named Ran. The adherents are mostly poverty-stricken and desperate. It is said that this Ran rewards poverty. That he demands abstinence from all things that bring pleasure."

Alwroth snorted. "Doesn't sound like something that will last. What sort of religion is against pleasure? Who would worship such a god?"

Garlath shrugged. "Seems to be somewhat popular with the serf class. They believe the more they suffer in life, the greater their reward in the afterlife."

Alwroth snorted again. "Sounds like something the nobility would dream up to keep them in line." He drew a breath. "And the baron?"

"Nothing yet. Nothing beyond the proclamation that anyone who uses magic in his demesne will be similarly executed. The whole town is in an uproar. People are worried that their neighbors will accuse them of sorcery just for spite. The few who had the power that I learned of left without fanfare as soon as possible."

"So I feared," Alwroth said. "The baron is at the heart of the matter. If only there was another way. I truly dislike removing a leader, any leader. If people believe we are capable of such acts, our own safety will be in jeopardy."

"We don't have to act right away. As I indicated, the true wizards have fled. We have time."

"What do you propose we do?" Alwroth asked.

"Let me remain in contact with them over the next few summers. See how this works out. We can still contact those in whom the power has recently awakened and steer them to Amedon. We have to caution them not to display their powers until they are well away from Frostan."

"Do you dislike Amedon that much?" Alwroth asked.

"Not dislike, no. The land suits me more than some stuffy old study. It's where I feel the most alive. Do you really want to remove the baron and then leave the place alone to see what transpires? Surely it's better someone keeps a close eye on things until they settle down a bit."

"Fine. If this is what you truly wish, then so be it." Alwroth waved his hand at the door and it sprang open. "Just remember. Take care. If this baron was able to murder one of our own, your safety is anything but assured. This wild life you long for may be the end of you, and if it is, I won't be charging in to seek revenge for your murder." He paused, his gaze fixed on Garlath. "You understand that?"

"Undoubtedly. I will endeavor to remain among the living, and if I do end up like poor Phomor, you won't be bothered by my spirit animal. You have my word on that."

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Alwroth said.

"Neither do I," Garlath muttered. "Neither do I."

ACCIDENTAL FIRE

SULRAD

Sulrad left the woods and the memory of the girl and returned to his home and chores. For the next moon, he tried to keep himself pure, to forsake the fire and magic, just as Merten insisted. Ran, he said, cared not for wizardry. Ran was the source of blessings, not magic. Still, it called to him, like an itch he longed to scratch. He would do it again. He knew. And then what? Would Ran strike him dead? Send a bolt of lightning to consume him? He had to find out.

He had to seek the girl.

Sulrad had little experience with women or girls. His mother's family never visited and his father had no family, so there were no cousins or siblings to learn from. The only woman he had known was his mother, and that hardly counted. Who was this girl? She said Frostan wasn't far, so that must be where she was.

He focused his thoughts on the hearth and the fire sprang to life almost without effort. He was getting better at this. Or was his magic growing stronger?

No time to worry about that.

He pushed his senses outward, toward the castle. He knew where the castle was, not far from his own home, perhaps a day's walk. He'd been there with his father, not

long after his mother had left. They had walked to the castle to purchase a piglet in the market. Merten believed that he could successfully raise hogs and earn coin from the effort, but when they attempted to purchase a breeding pair of piglets, the merchants had laughed at the wooden carvings Merten offered in exchange. No one, it seemed, cared one whit for the god Ran. They had returned home in shame. Sulrad felt terrible. The merchant had laughed at him and asked why a strong young lad like him didn't take better care of his dim-witted father. Had he no pride?

The castle stood on a hill above the Eldwise River that ran down the mountainside to empty into the sea. The moat that surrounded the castle was wide and deep, harboring creatures that could devour a man before his heart had time to stop beating, or so he'd heard.

There must be some way to reach the girl. He wanted to know why she was special. Why he could see her in the fire and no one else.

He let his senses roam, searching for a window that would permit him entry, but something had changed. There were no windows; the building had been sealed. The surrounding walls stretched to the sky, the carefully crafted stones blocking his entry.

He poked at them, but as he drew near, they burst into flame, searing his eyebrows and scorching his face.

The odor of burning hair laced the air.

"What's going on here?" Merten appeared in the doorway, axe in hand, his face a mask of anger.

"I called up fire." Sulrad brushed the burned hair from his face.

"I told you to stay away from the curse of the wizards. Don't you have any sense?" Merten stepped into the hovel and closed the door behind him, raising the axe.

Sulrad raised his hands to fend off the attack. His father had shown no remorse with the strap, but an axe? Surely not. Even Merten wasn't that mad, or was he? Sulrad's

heart raced and his breath caught in his throat as he searched for the words that would calm Merten down.

"Put your hands down," Merten shouted, "or I'll cut your fingers off, then we'll see how well you can do magic."

"It's not evil. It's just magic."

"It's consorting with demons, is what it is, and you have no right to the protection of Ran."

With his free hand, Merten grabbed the small statue Sulrad wore about his neck and jerked the cord tight, sending the axe whistling through the air. He cut the thong and yanked the statue from Sulrad's neck.

"Now get out." Merten cradled the small statue of Ran to his breast. "I'm through with you."

"But — Father?" His throat went even tighter, his words caught inside. Homeless. He would be homeless, no better than the cripple who sat at the entrance to town begging for coin. What would he do? Who would care for him? "Where will I go?"

"Maybe your magic can help you, because I'm finished with you. Leave this house and never return."

"But."

"Out."

Merten drew back the axe.

Sulrad's heart sank. In that moment, he knew that his own father would certainly kill him should he refuse.

He lowered his hands and stood slowly, his back to the cold hearth. "May I at least gather my belongings?"

Merten took a step toward him. "Out."

Sulrad jerked the door open and rushed into the fading light of the afternoon sun. No clothes, no food, no shelter. Where was he to sleep? What would he eat? He didn't even have his knife.

Sulrad stood glaring at the house. First his mother abandoned him, now his father disowned him. He would show them. He had power. He was not to be ordered around like a child. He was a wizard. He didn't need them.

He imagined the house bursting into flames, fire licking at the walls, the roof, consuming it, erasing it from his memory.

Pain flared in his chest.

He grasped his robe.

Was he dying?

Had Ran taken retribution on him for wanting to destroy his family home? He crumpled to his knees, the pain nearly intolerable. "I'm sorry, Lord Ran. Please forgive me."

The pain ceased. In its place came an emptiness, a longing that Sulrad had never felt before. It was as if he were somehow incomplete. He examined the longing. What was it that he lacked? As he pondered his desire, he noticed slight silver threads emanating from all around him. It was as if the world were alive and each life, no matter how insignificant, was sending a tiny thread of its life force to him. The silver threads wove in and around each other as they made their way toward his heart. No, not his heart — beside it.

The threads became thick and coiled like a snake about to strike.

Suddenly, the aching emptiness was gone, as if he had been filled with something, something he had yet to grasp.

In half a heartbeat, that something burst from his chest.

A brilliant silver ball of light hovered in the air before him.

He grasped it.

Power.

It was pure power.

He watched as the ball of silver light turned in the air before him. It was as if someone had shaped a sphere out of purest glass and made it into a mirror. The sphere threw back an image at Sulrad, upside down. The fields lay before him, open, inviting. Behind him was his home engulfed in flames.

Sulrad spun to take it in.

What had he done?

He hadn't meant to call up fire like that.

He was angry with Merten for certain, but not angry enough to burn him alive.

Sulrad raced for the house, but it was engulfed in flames. As he drew near, it singed the hair off his face and scorched his flesh.

"Father!" He reached out his hand wishing there was a spell of some sort to undo what he had done, but there was not. The flames licked the wood. The screams of his father were almost muted by their roar as they filled the early afternoon sky with black smoke.

SKY IRON

SULRAD

Sulrad immediately regretted his anger as he stood by and watched as the gold and yellow flames licked away at the only home he'd ever known. He cursed himself. He cursed his magic. He cursed his weakness at succumbing to his curiosity about the girl. Why had he let himself be led astray like that? He sat in the dust and watched his entire life as the flames consumed it, turning everything he had ever known into ashes that were carried away on the breeze.

Mercifully, the rain came and put out the smoldering remains. Sulrad thought the fire would have been hot enough to consume the body of his father, but it had not. The charred and bloated lump that had once been a man would surely haunt his dreams. He turned away. Merten had been a terrible father and the welts he left on Sulrad's back would be with him for the rest of his life, but did the man truly deserve this? He had continued to care for Sulrad even after Toval abandoned them. Sulrad glanced back at the charred remains, bile rising in his throat. The thought that he had caused this sickened him. His insides churned. He doubled over, emptying the contents of his stomach onto the ashes that covered the floor.

He wiped his mouth and stood, taking in the damage. Nothing was left except the hearth, and on it sat the only thing that wasn't charred, melted, or warped. The small statue of Ran that sat on the cracked stones. Whether through some quirk of fate or through divine intervention, this one thing had survived the flames when nothing else had.

"Why didn't you protect Merten?" Sulrad asked the statue.

"I protected you," a voice came to him, not through his ears, but directly into his head.

"What? You spoke?" He picked up the statue from the hearth and held it before his eyes. Bald, fat, hunched over, Ran was as unmoving as he had always been, and as silent.

"Did you say you protected me? From what?" Sulrad asked.

Images of Merten and his hatchet came flooding into Sulrad's mind, almost as if he were sitting before the fire and watching the scene play out in his head. In the flames, Merten burst in through the door and demanded to know what Sulrad had been doing in the woods. When Sulrad protested, Merten swung the hatchet at him, slicing his hand off and leaving him a bloody stump. Reflexively, Sulrad's good hand went to his wrist, but it was intact.

It must have been a dream, or a vision.

"Is that you?" he asked the statue, but it refused to answer.

He shoved the statue into his pocket and brushed the ash from his hands. The place was no longer livable. He could not stay here. Where would he go? What would he do? Should he bury Merten or leave him for the scavengers that would no doubt be along in the night? For a moment, he felt a twinge of guilt, but it passed. Hadn't Ran shown him the truth? This was no longer his home. It was just a pile of ash. Something that would soon fade to a memory. "I

can't stay here." He spoke the words aloud as if they had power.

That was it. His life with Merten was over. He would become a wizard. He would be respected and admired. He would learn magic and heal the sick and care for the poor. He would make sure no one else had to endure what he had, and as he made the decision, the burden he felt lifted. He headed down the path until he came to a place in the woods he knew well. The clearing afforded him shelter and access to clean running water. If he had to sleep outside, this was the best place. In the morning, he would find sticks and fashion a shelter out of leaves, then begin the task of rebuilding the hovel or building a new one. There were plenty of places better suited to a home than where it had been. Closer to a well, perhaps? Near a more well-trodden path? Planning helped distract him from his worries. It was getting late, and he still needed to gather at least a few branches to cover him should the night sky bring rain.

Sulrad fell asleep almost as fast as his head hit the rolled up cloak he had fashioned for his pillow, but his sleep was troubled. Dreams and visions of Merten and his hatchet melded with the burned and blackened corpse Sulrad had abandoned in the remains of his home. A loud bang awoke him. The woods reverberated with the sound of it, and the entire canopy swayed as one before settling back to their normal rustling. It was just before dawn.

Sulrad glanced around, searching for the source of the sound. Off to the north, a glow lit the trees from beneath. Not like a fire with a flickering light, but steady, as if the sun had fallen from the sky.

He rushed through the woods to investigate. Something had indeed fallen from the sky, snapping trees and uprooting the underbrush. As it slammed into the earth, it had created a crater-like hole. The light was coming from the hole. What could make such light?

Sulrad leaned over to get a better look. Deep within the hole was a brilliant red lump. It was misshapen and irregular, but appeared to be shiny and smooth. As he watched, the lump lost some of its light and luster. The brilliant red glow became orange, then faded until it was no more than a deep umber that winked out.

Sulrad wanted to investigate, but the object in the hole was hot. Hotter than the fire in the hearth. He would have to wait until it cooled.

Lying down beside the hole, he rested his head on the ground, listening to the object sizzle as it continued to cool. Sulrad already had his suspicions about what it was. Sky iron. It fell from the stars above as melted blobs of pure iron and was worth a king's ransom. Ran truly was looking out for him.



In the morning, Sulrad woke. His neck was sore, his arm tingling from having slept wrong on it, and he was wet all over with dew.

The hole he had curled up by was no longer hot. He touched the object embedded at the bottom of the hole. It was warm and smooth. The surface shone like a mirror.

Sky iron.

Plenty of it. The chunk of iron was the size of a large watermelon.

What would Merten have thought of such a find? Would he have taken it for his own or shared it with Sulrad? Would he have given thanks to Ran for such a gift? Sulrad paused. It no longer mattered what Merten thought. The man who had beat him for the slightest infraction was gone. There would be no more beatings. No more humiliation. He was rich. He would be respected and even loved. He would

purchase a home in Frostan and live like a wealthy merchant. If he could only get the iron out of the hole.

He searched around for anything he could use to dig, but all he could find was a broken branch.

He jabbed the branch into the dirt, tearing away chunks of rich black soil mixed with dried leaves, but as he dug deeper, the soil grew hard.

Reaching a layer of clay, he lifted the stick and drove it down with all his might.

A small chunk chipped away from the side of the hole as a sliver of wood penetrated his hand, sending pain shooting up his arm. Blood welled from the wound when he pulled the sliver out. He brought his hand to his mouth and sucked away the blood until it stopped oozing from the wound. This wasn't working. He needed to find something else, but what?

He needed a shovel or an axe. And when he did get the iron out of the ground, what was he going to do then? The object had snapped the trees by its mass. It was going to be heavy. Too heavy for him to lift out of the hole by himself.

He sat beside the hole, his stomach growling as a reminder that he had not eaten in some time. He needed to take a break, find something to fill the hole in his belly and think. What choices did he have? If he did dig the iron out of the ground, how would he get it to... Where would he take it? Who would buy such a thing from him? A blacksmith? A blacksmith would have use for sky iron, but would he have coin enough to purchase it?

Sulrad sat back, chewing on his thoughts. Could he trust the blacksmith? He had no idea. He had never had any dealings with the man, but Sulrad knew he couldn't get the iron out of the ground on his own. He had little choice. He'd make his way to the blacksmith's shop and see what he could arrange.

But not before he'd eaten.



The smith had been cagey about how much he would offer Sulrad for the sky iron.

"Don't be afeared, lad," he'd said. "I'm an honest man. If I cheated anyone, I'd never get another lick of business. This be a small town. Everyone talks."

When Sulrad described the sky iron to him, the blacksmith grilled him about where he had seen it fall, how loud had it been, what the glow had looked like. Sulrad answered every question the man had, save precisely where he had seen it. No reason to take a chance that the blacksmith was less honorable than his word.

The blacksmith turned to the young boy holding the hammer. "Go fetch the fellas and the iron wagon. Tell them we're going after a bit of sky iron. Tell them I'm thinking close to thirty stone."

The boy whistled and rushed off.

"Thirty stone?" Sulrad asked.

"If your description is right, then that's probably a bit light, but once you get to something that heavy, it takes a team to handle it."

In short order, the striker returned with a pair of strong young men. Twins from the looks of it, they stood a head taller than Sulrad and seemed not to be able to let their arms hang. They brought an iron wagon pulled by a team of oxen. In the bed of the wagon were all manner of shovels, pickaxes, and sharpened poles the likes of which Sulrad had never seen.

It was early afternoon by the time the two men had dug a channel beneath the sky iron and rigged an apparatus above it. They had felled a tree in order to get the cart properly positioned beside the hole. They hitched the oxen to a heavy rope that ran over a pulley and into the ground where a leather sling had been fastened around the iron.

The oxen strained to lift the chunk of iron free of the hole. It was easily twice the size of Sulrad's head. Pockmarked and creviced, but still shining like a mirror where the surface was smooth. When it had been raised above the level of the bed, the two men walked the oxen back until the wagon was positioned beneath it.

"So how much is it worth?" Sulrad asked.

"Hold on, lad. Let's get it back to the smith and see what we have. Sky iron can be pure as spring water, or it can be all dirty, filled with lumps of blackened coal that ruin the iron. I told you. I'm an honest man. I won't cheat you."

One of the two men dropped a heavy hand on Sulrad's shoulder, his bulging arm drawing him close. "What sort of place you come from that you don't trust anyone?" he asked.

"I trust him. It's just that I recently lost everything in a fire and I'm in need of coin to purchase lodging and food, and I don't even know where I'll even sleep tonight."

"You can stay in the loft above the smithy," the smith said. "There's plenty of room up there, and I don't think you'll mind a bit of hay, not from the looks of you."

"Thank you. That's most kind."

"Now, stop worrying about what's due you," he said. "No one is going to cheat you. You've earned your share fair and square."

"My share? But I found it."

"Sure you did. That's why you get a share, but what would you have done without us? Sat there until you died of hunger? Found someone else to dig it out for you?" He grasped Sulrad's arm, squeezing his bicep. "I think if it were just you, that lump of iron would still be sitting in the bottom of that hole until someone else came along and maybe took it from you and maybe slit your throat so they didn't have to share. Ever think of that?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

“No, you’re an honest lad, and we’re all honest men, so you have nothing to worry about, now do you?”

“I guess not.”

“Good. Now go get yourself something to eat. The Angry Scrivener has a fine fare.” He reached into his purse and drew out two silvers, handing them over to Sulrad. “That’s against your share once we see how good or bad this chunk of iron is. Get some food in you, then get some sleep. And stop your fretting.”

“Thank you.” Sulrad pocketed the silvers and tried to put the worries out of his head, but something nagged at the back of his mind. His share, the man had said. Wasn’t it all his? It was starting to look like it was not.

DIRE WARNINGS

GARLATH

Garlath stood before the assembled wizards in the council chambers. He had received the summons a glass after the midday meal. The council never convened until all the members had been fed and afforded the opportunity to take their midday rest. The chambers seemed to reflect the occupants to a man. The uniformity of their appearance made him smile, despite the seriousness of the subject they had gathered to discuss. The council of old men was how he had come to think of them. Even when they did invite younger men to participate, they were all so set in their ways that it hardly mattered. He preferred the field to the stuffy confines of Amedon, with its ancient stone walls erected by wizards and dragons in days long past. He'd take the smell of fresh-cut hay and a newly tapped keg of ale over the musty and moldy chamber any day.

"What makes this different from any other sky iron fall?" Alwroth demanded.

"It was found by a wizard," Garlath said. "A young one. One who has no idea of the power of sky iron — or the risk."

"So, go buy the iron from him before he discerns what it's worth. Then send him on his quest and guide him here," Alwroth said.

"It's never as simple as that, but it would give me great pleasure to find him and guide him home. That is, if he is willing."

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"One never knows, but when I saw the iron fall, I noticed something about him. He's not your average young wizard. He's got a feel to him that is strange, as if he were not completely engaged in our world. It's as if a part of him were somewhere else."

"Your dire warnings never fail to amuse," Alwroth said. "Go. Buy the iron and start the boy on his quest. I'm certain there was no need to call us together to discuss this." He glanced at the rest of the assembled wizards. Several nodded. Most remained silent, and a few looked to be asleep.

"I'll need coin," Garlath said.

"Draw what you need, and when you have secured the sky iron, hire a team and a wagon and have it brought back here. We don't need something like that getting into the wrong hands."

"By your leave?" Garlath asked.

"Yes. Go. You much prefer that to your duties here," Alwroth said.

Garlath bowed his head and backed out, closing the council doors behind him. He breathed a heavy sigh and pressed his back against the solid wooden doors.

"They agree?" Egrid stood there beside the door as if she'd been waiting for him to return. She was a few summers older than Garlath, with fiery red hair that fell about her shoulders in curls. Her complexion was alabaster white, her skin milky smooth in stark contrast to the rest of her family who all shared freckles and the slight red skin tone that made them appear angry even when they weren't.

"They agreed. Can you please ask the master of coin for three hundred gold?" Garlath leaned in close and

whispered, "Don't let him talk you out of a single coin. I'm off to fetch thirty stone of sky iron."

"Thirty stone!" Egrid whistled. "That's more than anyone has ever brought back."

"It will make me famous," Garlath said.

"You're already famous."

"Not famous, infamous," he said. "There's a difference."

"You're difficult. The master of coin will have a fit, of that I'm certain." She paused. "Anything else you need along with a king's ransom in gold?"

"A travel pack? Some dry bread and jerked beef. The place I'm headed to is a bit isolated and out of the way. I saw the sky iron fall in a vision, but I've no idea where the wizard who found it lives, or even where the smith he sold the iron to has his shop. I believe I'll be on the road for a while."

"What do you expect me to do while you're gone?" she asked.

"You will find suitable entertainment, of this I am certain, and I won't be gone that long. All I need do is buy the iron and escort it back. I'll engage the young wizard in a vision and send him on his quest to keep him distracted. I can keep tabs on him while I escort the wagon home."

"I suppose there is no arguing with a Master Wizard, is there?" She leaned in close and breathed in his ear. "Know that I'll miss you while you're gone."

Garlath embraced her. "Don't let your tears of loneliness fill the study while I'm away."

"I shan't." She broke free of his embrace and faced him.

She balled her hand into a fist, raised it to her lips, and kissed it. "And lest you forget about me, I'll leave you a reminder." The blow that she leveled at him was precise and powerful. The lump in his arm resulting from it would bear a bruise for at least a hand of days.

He rubbed his arm as he watched her walk off. Most wizards chose an assistant who was subservient and

respectful. It was expected, especially of the more powerful ones, but Garlath found Egrid to be a constant source of surprises, and that made life interesting.



The next day, Garlath shouldered his pack and envisioned the hole in the earth where the sky iron had come crashing down. He pulled himself across the void to the clearing in the woods. The iron wagon he'd left ruts. Thirty stone. That was a lot of iron.

As he stepped out of the void and into the forest, the temperature rose enough to make him sweat. The ground was wet, whether from dew or an overnight rain, he couldn't tell. He glanced around, hoping that someone might have remained or returned, but the place was quiet save for the chirping of crickets and the occasional songbird. At least the wagon would be easy to follow. The tracks led out of the woods to a dusty road. From the way the gouges in the field arced, he was guessing he would find the town to the south.

He glanced ahead. No sign of any town. It had to be there, but how far away?.

No matter. The day was warm, the sun was shining, and there wasn't a wizard for leagues around. Garlath was in his element. It would be an enjoyable interlude to an otherwise dreary autumn.

The sound of horse hooves on dirt alerted Garlath to the approaching wagon well before he saw the dust cloud raised by its wheels. When the wagon drew near, he stepped off the road and waited.

"Going somewhere, sir?" The driver was a young girl, no more than a dozen summers in age. She was tall and lithe. Her delicate features were shrouded in shadow by the large-brimmed hat that rode atop a tangle of brown curls.

She held the reins as if accustomed to controlling the large beast with little more than a gentle touch.

"I'm headed to town," Garlath said.

"Which town?" she asked.

"That one?" Garlath nodded down the road.

"Where you from that you don't know the name of the town you're headed for? You not from around here? Not know how to read a map?"

"Sorry to say, I cannot. Can you?" Garlath asked.

The girl spoke as if she were proud of her lack of education. "No. Don't read. No use for it."

Garlath held his peace. He wanted to ask for a ride but wasn't certain how such a request would be received. She was a strange one, just the sort of person he delighted in meeting.

"You climbing aboard, or you prefer to walk?" she asked.

"Boarding." Garlath tossed his pack onto the seat beside her and climbed up. The wagon was tall. She must be expecting either deep ruts or running water. Most farm wagons were short and stout, meant to carry heavy loads, but this one held only a few crates covered with a heavy red cloth.

"What you hauling?" Garlath asked.

The girl snapped the reins, and the wagon lurched to a start. "Fowl."

Garlath expected the cackling of hens that usually erupted at the slightest disturbance, but no sound emerged from the back of the wagon. Whatever the girl was carrying, it wasn't fowl. He extended his senses to the rear. The crates were not simple crates, but fashioned of dense hard wood with reinforced iron corners and a heavy lock. Inside each crate was a single animal, not a fowl, but something else. He strained, but he could not discern anything more. It was as if there was a spell on the crate to prevent prying eyes from seeing in, or perhaps to prevent whatever was inside from escaping.

"Those aren't fowl, are they?" he asked.

The girl pulled back on the reins, bringing the horse to a halt. She turned slowly to face Garlath. "I thought you wanted a ride."

"I do, and I'm grateful for it."

"Grateful enough to mind your own business and not ask about mine?" she asked.

"Certainly," Garlath answered. "Do you know the smith in the town ahead? What's it called again?"

The girl laughed, a light, pleasant laugh, then snapped the reins once more. "It's called Frostan. It's where Baron Reik makes his home. Good-sized town. Fair market when it's open. The nobles have coin enough for the more exotic tastes, if you know what I mean. I cater to a very special group of clients."

Garlath wanted to ask about her clients but was certain that would cost him his ride. "The blacksmith?"

"Nortren's his name. He's the only blacksmith in town. He'll cheat you out of your last coin while he brags about how honest he is. Watch out for him."

"Thank you for the word of warning. My name is Garlath." Garlath extended his hand, but the girl ignored it, shaking her head as if to say that she wasn't about to share her name.

They rode in silence until she pulled the wagon to a stop in front of an open-fronted building that contained two forges. One had a large stack of flat-iron positioned next to it and a half-completed wagon tongue. Beside that stood a heavy anvil that could have weighed as much as the sky iron Garlath sought. The second forge was at the back of the building. It was small and flanked by the sort of anvil that was used for fine work, such as hammering knives and swords or even nails.

"Watch your back," the girl said as Garlath grabbed his pack and climbed down from the wagon.

"Let me pay for your kindness," Garlath said.

"Pay me with your silence." She smiled and touched the brim of her hat before snapping the reins and rolling away.

A large man stepped from the shadows. He wore a leather apron with bare arms and heavy leather gloves. "Looking for someone?" he asked.

"Nortren?"

"Who's asking?"

"I'm Garlath. A wizard from Amedon. Rumor has it you have come into possession of a rather large amount of sky iron."

"What business is it of yours what I've come into possession of?" He spoke the words as if they left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"We like to keep the sky iron safe from those who would use it for ill," Garlath explained.

"You mean to keep it for yourself?" Nortren snorted.

"Not precisely, no. Do you have the sky iron, or don't you? I assure you I can pay for it."

"Yeh? You got sixty golds on ya?"

"Sixty golds? Certainly you can let it go for less than that. You've barely had time to melt it down and form it into sheets. It's not worth sixty golds until it's been worked, and you can hardly have had time to work much of it."

"How do you know what I've had time for and what I haven't?"

"You've only had the sky iron for a few days. That's not enough time to do much of anything. I saw it come down in a vision. I know what you possess and for how long. I'm here to offer you a fair price for it."

The blacksmith folded his arms across his broad chest. "I'm not interested in your wizard's gold. Leave me alone."

"I wish I could, but, as I said, I'm here to make you a fair offer. You'd be ill advised to refuse."

"So?" Nortren called to the boy running the bellows. "Go fetch the fellas."

The boy rushed off.

"Nortren. It is Nortren, isn't it?"

"Why are you still here?" the man asked.

"Please, don't turn a pleasant negotiation into something it's not meant to be."

"And I'm telling you to get yourself gone. I'm not interested in your gold. The price has just gone up. Now I'm asking a hundred golds. Got that much on ya?" Nortren asked.

Things were not going as Garlath had planned. "No."

"The man asked you to leave," the voice from behind Garlath was deep and gravelly.

"We're just negotiating for a bit of iron." Garlath turned to find two large men standing behind him. From the looks of them, they were kin to Nortren, sharing the same large build.

The man on the left took a step toward Garlath, reaching out a meaty hand that looked accustomed to swinging a heavy hammer. "Negotiations are over."

One man with a hammer posed little threat. Two, more so, but three was probably more than Garlath was confident he could handle. He needed time. Time to come up with a spell that would work on all three of them at once. There was little chance of three separate castings working before one of the men attacked. He needed to stall. "Sorry to hear that," he said. "I meant no harm, and I offered a fair price."

He searched his memory for the spell needed. Being family like they were, it would be much easier than enthralling three separate individuals. Still, it wouldn't be easy. But what else could he do. He had to try. "Audi verb mea. Non erit sanctuarium meum ego dominus." He called up the image of the three big men doing precisely as he commanded and nothing else. The spell would last so long as he was present. It was simple. He'd found that the simpler the incantation, the less work it was to enforce it.

The man stopped mid-swing, his large fist hanging in the air. Garlath slipped a quick glance at the other brother who

had taken up position beside him while he had been focused on the first man. Both brothers and the smith stood frozen in position.

"How do you feel about taking a trip? Just until I'm safely away from here?" Garlath asked the taller brother.

Neither man spoke.

He had not expected them to.

He had not commanded them to.

They would remain silent until commanded to speak. The spell was simple but required a lot of power. His personal reserves would hold the spell, but only long enough to get the sky iron to Amedon. He would have little left should anything else arise. He would release the smith once they were safely out of the city.

"You!" Garlath turned to the boy who had summoned the men. "Where's the sky iron?"

The boy was shaking. "You're not going to turn me into a toad, are you?"

"Not unless you try something funny."

"It's over there." He pointed to a canvas in the back of the forge.

"Is that all of it?" Garlath asked.

"Most of it."

"Where's the rest?"

"The boy who found it has it. Nortren made him a knife out of it."

"He made a knife out of it?" What a fool. Why had the smith done that? Did he not know what he wrought, or that he had given it to one of the few people in the land who could actually get some use out of such a thing?

"Just a small one." The boy held his fingers up, showing a blade less than a span in length. "He's the one who found the iron. It was only fair."

Garlath shook his head. "You an honest boy?"

"Yes, sir. I am."

“This is for Nortren when he wakes from my spell. Tell him his cousins are going with me to Amedon to deliver the sky iron, but this is fair payment.” Garlath tossed the purse to the boy.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out another coin and handed it to the boy. “A silver for your honesty. I don’t have to tell you what happens if you fail to deliver that to Nortren?”

“No, sire. I’ll make sure that he gets it.”

“See that you do.” Garlath turned to the two men standing ready behind him. “Get your wagon and load up all the remaining sky iron.”

The two men nodded wordlessly and got to work.

Garlath shook his head. It was going to be a long trip to Amedon.

SACRIFICE

SULRAD

Sulrad found himself back in the woods once more. No home, no parents. How would his mother find him if she decided to return? Secretly, he hoped she would. Maybe if he foreswore magic? If he told her Merten was dead and she was his only family? Would she take him in then? The more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed. He knew her too well. She was proud and stubborn. She would never take him back. He was alone, with nothing to call his own. The two silvers he had been given in advance for the sky iron turned out to be almost all he was ever to see. Even though the sky iron weighed in at thirty stone, worth three hundred gold by any reckoning, the blacksmith had insisted that once the iron had been divided in quarters, split down into workable chunks and beaten into sheets and rod stock for sale, there was little profit left. He'd fashioned a knife out of Sulrad's portion and delivered it to him, along with two additional silvers. It turned out the smith was as good as his word, but Sulrad had found out too late that his word was worth nothing to him or anyone else.

Sulrad had spent the coin on food and lodging. He used his final two coppers to purchase a length of cord and a small portion of salt before heading back to the woods. He'd

set traps for hare and small rodents in the hopes of catching enough meat to keep himself fed. With any luck, he'd also have pelts that he could tan and sell in the market. A pair of pelts was all he needed to purchase even more salt, and he would be on his way to becoming a trapper.

He liked the sound of that. Trapper Sulrad. He would roam the wild forests hunting and trapping to return to the city every moon with a bag of pelts that he would exchange for silver or even gold. It would be a good life. Better than scratching out a living carving statues.

His hand went to the small carving that hung around his neck. He'd started wearing it again. Most folks made fun of him when they saw it, but he knew that Ran did indeed watch over him. It was Ran who saved him from his father, and Ran who guided him to the sky iron, even if Ran was conspicuously absent when the blacksmith had swindled him. No matter. There would be game and pelts and coin.

The first trap had been sprung. A small tuft of gray fur was caught in the snare, but no game. Sulrad checked it over, making certain that it was properly positioned on the path where the hares were likely to pass. The surrounding way was blocked by thorns to keep the animal inside the kill zone. It happened sometimes. Hares were notoriously skittish. He'd watched a trap one time and witnessed a hare sniff it, then jump right over it, setting it snapping at empty air.

He cursed his ill fortune. Had Ran forsaken him in his time of need? Perhaps the next trap, but it too was empty. Nothing had wandered along the well-trodden path that he had chosen. That, too, was not uncommon. Not every trail was used every day, but it would have been nice to have at least one snare fulfill its purpose. Maybe the hares had gone in a different direction on their daily foraging, or perhaps they had abandoned the warren for another, more secure location. He would find one, of that he was certain. Ran would not have abandoned him. Not now.

The third snare was likewise empty, and Sulrad began to grow worried. Without meat, he'd be stuck eating root vegetables he could scrounge. They took more work than skinning and roasting a hare because he had to dig them from the dirt and wash them and roast them before they were soft enough to eat. If he didn't catch something soon, he'd have to start looking for those.

The final snare held something. A big brown hare with mottled gray fur had become entangled in the snare. When it worked properly, the snare caught the hare around the throat and broke its neck. It was quick and painless. But this hare had stepped through the snare. As it triggered, the snare had caught the animal's leg and head. The beast was still alive. It struggled, its powerful hind leg thumping against the ground in a rapid staccato beat that lasted a handful of heartbeats and then paused, only to start again.

Sulrad knelt down beside the snare. "You were supposed to die quickly." He stretched out his hand and placed it on the hare's fur. The animal jerked wildly and let out a scream the likes of which Sulrad had never heard before. It almost sounded as if a small child had cried out in terror. Sulrad shuddered. He had not intended to cause pain, even to an animal. He needed to put it out of its misery. He was no monster.

"I'll make this quick."

He placed one hand on the rapidly rising and falling chest and grasped the neck of the hare with his other. A brief snap and it would all be done, quick, painless, merciful, but something nagged at the back of his mind. There was another way. Just as fast, or almost. The sky iron of the knife seemed to call out to him, to test out the razor-sharp blade the blacksmith had given him. It was worth quite a bit, not three hundred golds, not even a dozen golds, but it was rare, and something that few possessed.

He drew the blade and held it, staring at the design that seemed to swim beneath the surface of the glistening iron.

There were patterns in the iron, not just the pattern caused by the repeated folding and welding of the iron as it was worked. No, these were different. They almost looked like words. If only Sulrad had learned how to read.

As he held the blade, the clouds broke. A shaft of sunlight streamed in through the branches, striking the hare on its throat. It was almost sunset. If he didn't get started, Sulrad would be skinning the hare by firelight. He placed the blade against the animal's throat, letting the sunbeam illuminate the symbols in the iron.

One smooth motion and the hare's throat was slit. The animal let out a scream as the blade sliced through it, then fell silent. But things were not as Sulrad had expected. The blood should have run free, soaking into the ground beneath the struggling animal, but it didn't. Drops of blood ran down the silky fur. Instead of dropping to the ground, they turned to sparkling points of light. A myriad of orange motes lit the shadows beneath the canopy of leaves as the hare's corpse vanished.

At first, the sparks behaved just like a fire. They rose into the dusk and vanished as if the fire inside had gone out, but a few reversed course, plunging back toward the ground only to rise again. The longer he watched, the brighter the remaining sparks grew. Spinning, they chased one another in a circle, growing ever brighter until Sulrad had to shield his eyes from the light.

Was it the hare or the iron that was causing this? Sulrad raised the knife and carefully guided the tip of the sky iron blade into the swirling motes. As the iron penetrated their path, they shied away as if reluctant to draw close to it.

He pushed the blade further into the swirling sparks.

This time, the spinning ring of fire collapsed into the size of an apple. The sparks shifted colors from red to yellow, to amber and back again as they wound themselves tighter and tighter into a ball of light. The sphere emitted a shrill

whistle that made the death screams of the hare sound almost pleasant by comparison.

Sulrad inserted the point of the sky iron into the ball of flame, hoping to influence it in some manner or encourage it to cease its deafening noise.

This time, the sparks did not shy away from the blade. They swarmed closer and closer until, with a great bang, they rushed to the blade, soaking into the sky iron as if they were returning to their long-lost home. For a moment, everything went dark and silent.

What had he just witnessed? Here was magic on a scale he had never imagined. With magic like this, he could be a wizard, revered and respected. For a moment, he allowed himself to imagine a future where he wielded magic. People would flock to him for the aid only he could offer. He would be modest. Humble. He would hide his greatness. Ran cared not for the proud, but how could he be anything but proud. He had magic. He was a wizard. Before he had a chance to entertain another thought, the knife grew hot in his hand, almost too hot to grasp. He fought the pain. He wasn't about to let go of the only thing he owned of value. He tightened his grip even as it threatened to burn his flesh.

A shock ran up his arm, rushed toward his heart, and exploded. It felt like he had been kicked in the chest by a mule. His heart skipped a beat, but it soon settled down to its regular rhythm. The pain remained. A burning pain that called to him to do — what?

What did it want of him?

He could feel the ball of fire burning inside his ribs, swirling and spitting sparks. It was a part of him now. He reached for it with his imaginary hand. He grasped the fire, overwhelmed with sensations, sights, images, memories. There was the hare as it stuck a timid foot into the snare, and there it was earlier in the day, separating from the rest

of its warren to search out food. But there was more. The iron was there too, the sky iron that formed the blade.

The iron was old, so old it was almost too ancient to comprehend. It had spent lonely ages lost in the darkness of the great void, spinning, orbiting the great ball of fire that was the sun, waiting for the chance to live again, to be part of something bigger once again, but that chance never came. After aeons, the iron was nudged from its normal course. It swung toward the great warmth of the sun, only to race back into the dark and cold reaches of the void once more. Time and time again, it swung close to the sun, then back out into the dark, until one day, something changed. This time, there was a great blue marble in its path. It passed close by and was yanked from its path once more. The great void had no hold on it. It swung away from the marble, only to draw close once again, this time close enough to be captured in the rush of air as it sped toward the ground.

Sulrad felt the heat as the iron screamed through the evening air, felt the bubbling of the iron itself as it rushed for the earth, felt the impact with the ground, dirt flying from it as it dug itself into the soil.

With a great rush, Sulrad was filled with the power of that heat, as if the iron had soaked it all up and now relinquished it to him.

"Incendio ignio," Sulrad whispered the words.

The fire within him raced for his fingertips and out into the air above his hand. It formed itself into a shimmering, shining ball of sparks not unlike the one that had formed when he had taken the life of the hare.

"Incendio extinguer." The words came to him as if spoken by Ran himself.

The ball of fire popped and vanished.

"Incendio ignio," Sulrad said. This time, his words were bold, a command.

The ball of fire winked back into existence as if eager to do his bidding.

"Incendio extinguere," he said.

The fire vanished.

"Ignio." Fire

"Extinguere." The fire vanished.

"Ignio," Sulrad said.

The fire appeared.

"Go." He thrust the fireball away from him, imagining it striking the tree not a dozen spans from where he sat.

The fireball rushed to the tree. It was as if time slowed to a crawl. The fireball distorted as it struck the tree until it broke into a shower of sparks that swiftly encircled the trunk. Sparks raced up the tree, branching out to follow each limb and leaf until the tree was completely enmeshed in flickering lights. For half a heartbeat, the sparks lingered. Sulrad drew a breath. Never had he seen something so beautiful. It was as if the stars had fallen from the heavens and wrapped the tree with their light. With a whoosh, the sparks ignited. The tree was consumed in half a heartbeat and time resumed its normal pace.

Magic.

He had magic. He commanded the magic, and it obeyed. No more beatings. No more poverty. He had done it. No one could deny it. He was a wizard. But could he do it again?

"Again," he said.

Nothing.

Ignio. This time, he mouthed the words but remained silent.

The fire sprang to life.

Go. He shoved the fire at the tree beside the one he had just incinerated.

The tree vanished in a puff of flames.

"Ran is all powerful," he muttered. "Thank you, Lord Ran, for your blessing."

He reached into his shirt and withdrew the small carving and kissed it.

VISITATION

SULRAD

That night, after taking the blood of the hare into himself, Sulrad found it difficult to sleep. He tossed and turned, trying to determine just what had transpired. He'd butchered many a hare in his day, and nothing like this had ever happened. Was it the sky iron? Was it because now he had magic? Both? Whatever it was, he felt elated. The power that he'd absorbed rode inside his chest like a quiet ball of fire, always making itself known as if it wanted him never to forget it was there.

He used his newfound magic to create fire and dismiss it until it felt as if the magic were somehow dying away, as if he were consuming it when he brought forth fire. He stopped. Better to leave it alone for a while, see if it returned. Or would he need to find another hare?

The thought of the hare reminded him that he had not eaten. His stomach was empty and expressing its displeasure, but he ignored it. This wasn't the first time he'd gone without. Merten often came home empty-handed. On those days, he made a lengthy pronouncement about gluttony and how too many folks consumed more than was absolutely necessary, and how that was a sin against Ran, who had created the bounty not to be wasted but used sparingly and treasured.

Sulrad had never believed that Ran cared one way or another about how much he ate, but he'd nodded his head and gone to bed hungry so as not to anger his father. He paused at that thought. Merten was gone. He no longer had to fear what his father thought, but what about Ran? Had Ran not shown mercy? What harsh punishment would an angry god inflict on him for misdeeds? Hunger was by far preferable to an angry god. He could survive. He'd done it often enough.

He rolled up his pack and lay down, hoping to get some sleep before morning. Perhaps he'd pay a visit to the blacksmith and show off his ability to raise fire. That might remind the man of his promise to pay Sulrad his due. With that thought, he drifted off to sleep.

He was wakened in the middle of the night by an insistent voice calling his name.

"Sulrad," it said. "Sulrad. I need to speak with you. Let me in."

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. It was dark, and no one was around. Why then the voice?

The voice came once more. "Sulrad. Open yourself and let me in."

"Who are you?"

As if his response had granted it permission, a figure materialized in the air before him. He was a rugged-looking man with close-cropped hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He leaned forward as if he were sitting behind a desk or table and wanted to get a closer look at Sulrad.

He inclined his head toward the two trees that had been transformed into a pile of ash. "I see you've been practicing raising fire."

"Why are you here?"

"To guide you. When the power awakens in a boy, he usually attempts something like you did. It creates a disturbance in the magical field the likes of which you would not believe. Every wizard in the land could feel it

when you torched those trees last evening, and believe you me, not all of them are as tolerant as I am. You have already attracted the attention of some very powerful and very impatient wizards. Let me teach you how to shield your power so you don't earn the ire of everyone who has to put up with the noise of your incantations."

"Sensed it when I did magic?" Sulrad asked. "Like this?" He stretched his hand out and called forth fire. The image of the wizard winced as if in pain, recovering only when Sulrad extinguished the fireball.

"Let me show you how it feels." A dark curtain surrounded the two of them, and the image of the wizard imitated Sulrad's gesture. As the fire came to life, it emitted a screech that pierced the air and sent waves of pain through Sulrad's head. It was as if someone had shoved a pair of needles into his ears and swished them around inside his head. His eyes erupted with fire, and his vision dimmed. Then, as soon as it began, it was gone. The silence of the night returned and Sulrad's vision recovered.

"See?" the wizard asked.

"See what?"

"That's what it feels like when you call forth the fire. We all feel it."

"How?"

"You'd have to ask someone with a lot more wisdom than I. I know it happens. I've felt it often enough but have no idea how it works. I can teach you to contain your magic and shield yourself from other wizards. Please let me do that."

Sulrad pondered the words. Here was a wizard who wanted to tell him what to do. He had barely escaped the life his father had wished for him. Why allow another to control him as Merten had? He was a wizard. He had power. Had he not just demonstrated that? Who was this wizard anyway to demand that he do as told? Why listen? What was there to gain?

"If I refuse?" Sulrad asked. His voice wavered despite his best efforts to control it.

"You must cease calling forth your magic or suffer the consequences."

"What consequences? Who's going to stop me?"

"Some wizard who has grown tired of listening to your incantations."

"So some wizard will stop me," Sulrad said.

"Not stop you. Kill you."

Sulrad winced. Kill him. For practicing magic? How arrogant. Who did he think he was? Was this the way of it? Wizards appeared and made demands of one another and threatened their life if they refused? He thought there was honor among wizards. From the sound of it, he could not have been farther from the truth. Could the wizard really kill him? He was afraid to find out, but he was not about to let someone, not even a wizard, start telling him how to live his life.

"Why would I trust you? Why do you care what I do?"

"Because you're already powerful. If not, your use of magic would be a mere annoyance. We can shut out most, but you, you're well past that point. Your only alternative is to learn to shield yourself."

"What if I want to learn more?" Sulrad asked.

"Then you need to come here, to Amedon. We can teach you whatever it is you wish to learn."

"Anything?" Sulrad asked.

"Anything. Now let me show you how to shield yourself."



After a night of lessons, the wizard had given Sulrad instructions on how to get to Amedon. He said it was a time-honored tradition for young wizards to travel the land as they learned to use their powers, and that it gave them a

perspective that would assist them later in life. Sulrad found the reasoning odd, but who was he to say what was right for a wizard? He had never imagined a place where magic was studied and never imagined himself as one of those students. It was all a bit overwhelming. He had been waiting a lifetime for just such an opportunity. He just hadn't known it.

The sky held the hint of color that heralded the dawn when he finally lay back to catch a few glasses of sleep. He chose a spot in the center of the clearing where he could watch the sky. It was comforting and never failed to catch his interest. Toval had taught him the names of the major constellations that populated the night sky and spent many a night searching them, looking for any detail that he might have missed. Tonight, the maiden was directly overhead, a sign that the fall was near. The harvest would most certainly begin on the next full moon.

As he watched the stars, one of them flickered. There, in the maiden's belt. Was that star twinkling red where it used to be white? Sulrad peered closer. The whole group of stars was wavering, as if someone had pulled a curtain of the finest silk across them.

Without warning, the sky exploded with color — greens and blues with a touch of yellow and red. The colors came to life fully formed, great billowing curtains of light hanging from the maiden's belt stretching toward the ground. He peered at it in fascination, staring so intently that his eyes grew dry. Still, he stared. What did it mean?

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the colors vanished. The night sky resumed its usual form, every star just where it belonged. It was as if someone had opened a door and closed it again, letting in the smallest bit of dust. And that dust was magic, a magic like he had never felt before. A chill ran up his spine. Was this what it was like to be a wizard? Had the sky itself just opened to shower him with power? What would he do with such power? He was

eager to get to Amedon, where all his questions would be answered.

He was tempted to contact the wizard who had been instructing him, but something told him that he might not get answers that way. The wizard was firm. Sulrad needed to learn to control his magic before he would be taught anything beyond simple shields.

There was only one other person he knew who had magic.

Could he contact her?

He settled down in front of the small ring of stones he had used to make his evening fire. Embers glowed faintly. Most of the wood had burned, but there was still some unconsumed.

"Incendio ignius," he whispered, remembering to keep his shields in place as he had been taught.

The fire sprang to life.

"Show me." Would it work? He felt the magic rise within his newly constructed shields. It swirled like a dust devil, sparks lifting from the fire to chase each other around some invisible barrier.

He watched entranced for several heartbeats before recalling what he was attempting.

The girl.

"Show me," he repeated.

The smoke from his fire organized itself into a sphere, filling with light.

"Where are you?" He leaned in.

The smoke was beginning to take form, but it was fuzzy, muted.

He relaxed his shields just a bit, imagining a small hole that would allow his magic to escape. He focused on the room where he had seen the girl.

The smoke took form.

She was there.

She looked up as if startled.

"Don't be afraid," Sulrad said.

"Oh. It's you." The image of the girl became clearer. "You look different."

"I've grown?"

"No. That's not it. I can sense something about you. Something different. You're clearer, but something else."

"I've been learning shields. Maybe that's it. The wizards have been in touch with me. They have told me to travel to Amedon where I can learn magic."

The figure in the smoke shook her head. "I wish that were the case with me. I have to hide my powers. If my father found out, he'd burn me at the stake."

"Come with me to Amedon. We can learn together."

"With you?" She laughed. "I'm promised to the son of the neighboring baron. I'm to be a baroness in my own right. You expect me to give that all up and become a wandering wizard?"

Sulrad paused. He'd always thought of her as a friend, and as a friend, he considered them of similar status. He knew she was some sort of royal, but deep down, he thought of her as some peasant living in luxury. Truly, he had no concept of what her life must be like.

"How will you learn magic if your father disapproves?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I am learning. Slowly, but I'm learning. Is that not what they have asked you to do? Travel the land and learn magic on your own while you make your way to Amedon? How am I so different, then? I won't be traveling, but I'll be learning."

"But we could learn together," he said.

"So teach me. Tell me what you have learned of shields."

"Now?"

"Why not now?"

"Well. It starts with your imagination. You visualize a fence or a wall around you. Make it solid. Then try to do

magic. You should feel the difference when you do. It's as if your own voice is echoing back from a distant mountain."

Her face in the smoke scrunched up. "Like this?"

Suddenly, the smoke exploded with a loud pop.

The fire went out.

Try as he might, Sulrad could not relight it. Something was dampening it out.

Had she done that?

After a hand of heartbeats, Sulrad gave up.

Whatever she had done, he wasn't about to figure it out.

He leaned back and looked up into the sky, only now realizing he had completely forgotten to ask her if she knew anything about the lights he had seen.

Perhaps tomorrow. There was always tomorrow.

HIGHWAYMEN

SULRAD

In the morning, Sulrad packed his meager belongings and set out for the wizards' city of Amedon. It would take some time to reach Amedon. The wizard had not explained how to get there but told him he would figure it out when he was ready and that the journey would be more challenging than a mere walk in the woods. He would have to cross the mountains and possibly seas to reach Amedon. It weighed on Sulrad. What if he got lost along the way? What if he never found the proper path? What if he ran out of provisions or coin? If he did, he'd have to work as a laborer or farmhand to earn his fare, and that would slow things down.

He shoved his worries aside and set out after a meager morning meal of roasted root vegetables. His father had taught him to live on whatever he could forage from the surrounding fields and woods. He glanced back. He was far enough from home that he could not see it, but it drew his thoughts. It had not been a happy home, but it was all he ever knew. Even so, the wizard had said they would welcome him in Amedon when he arrived. That was all he needed to know. He set out with a spring in his steps he hadn't felt in summers.

Sulrad had made it a league and a half from home when he encountered a pair of travelers, a young woman and a man. They wore homespun garments that had been dyed a deep brown, the color of a newly turned field in spring. The man carried a stick, a branch cut from a tree that had been stripped of its bark and polished until it shone.

"Morning, traveler," the young woman said.

"Morning." Sulrad raised his hand in greeting.

"Where you bound?" The girl smiled and shifted the pack she wore from one shoulder to the other.

"To Amedon."

"Amedon?" the girl asked. "Never heard of it."

"It's the wizard city. I'm going there to train."

"Wizard? Are you a wizard?" The girl's smile twisted into a wry, almost coquettish grin. "I've never met a wizard. Can you summon up fire?"

"Certainly." Sulrad stretched out his hand. "Incendio ignius." He spoke the words that would call the fire into existence, but nothing happened. He turned his attention into his chest where he had come to believe the magic rested. It was empty. Had he used it all up contacting the girl? Was that it? How long would it take to recover? Where did the magic come from anyway?

The young man finally spoke. "Some wizard you are." His words were rough, his accent strange. "Maybe you're a thief and not a wizard. Maybe you stole that fancy knife you carry at your belt."

"I am a wizard, and the knife is mine. I found the sky iron and helped dig it from the ground."

"You did, did you?" The young man took a step toward Sulrad, raising his staff as he did.

"Don't come any closer." Sulrad held up his hand. He visualized the fire springing to life in his palm, just as it had the night before, but nothing happened. No fire, not even a warming of his palm. Where was his magic now?

Sulrad took a step back, stumbled, and landed squarely on his back. He glanced up. The young girl had positioned herself behind him, and the young man had driven him back until he tripped over her. What was going on here?

"I think you're a thief." The young woman rested her foot on his stomach. "I think whoever owns that fancy knife will pay a reward for it. I think you should give it to us."

"I'll do no such thing. It's mine. I found the sky iron. I helped dig it from the ground. I helped forge the blade. It's mine." Why was he begging? Where was his magic when he needed it? If he could raise no fire, at least he had the knife. He didn't have to lie there and take this treatment.

Sulrad drew the sky iron blade from his belt and slashed at the young woman's leg. The blade barely missed her as she jumped back.

"Watch this one; he has a bit of fight to him," she said.

"Not for long." The young man struck Sulrad on the wrist, knocking the blade from his hand.

"See. No more stinger." The young man jabbed Sulrad with the staff. The gnarled wood struck him in the gut, knocking the wind out of him.

"Stop." Sulrad grabbed at his middle, trying to protect himself from the blow.

"You got any coin?" the young woman demanded.

"Coin?" Sulrad gasped to get the words out.

"Coin," she said. "Pay us and we'll let you live."

Sulrad had never encountered such violence before. Sure, he'd been beaten with a strap more often than he could recall, but never had he feared for his life. Was this the day of his death? The day had started off so well. He wished he had been braver. He wished he had used the sky iron knife to stop them from hurting him. He wished a number of things, but all he could think was that he was weak, and now he was about to die. "Why are you doing this to me?" he begged.

"Because we can," the young man said. "Because you're a thief. Because we're hungry and you look like you have coin."

"I have nothing," Sulrad lied.

"We'll see about that."

This time, the staff struck Sulrad in the head and he saw stars. He tried to push them away and fend off the hands that grabbed at his purse, but he was having trouble seeing straight.

"See, I said he was a thief. What's a poor traveler like you doing with silvers?" the young woman demanded.

"They're mine. They're all that's left of the coin I received for the sky iron I sold."

"Here we go again, as if the gods favored you. They send sky iron to earth just for you." The young woman slipped his purse into her pocket and stood. "You must be such a fortunate man."

The young man laughed. "Fortunate enough to meet us. Most highwaymen would have killed you and taken everything, including your clothes, but we're not like them. We just want your pack, your knife, and your coin. We'll leave you your clothes."

"But I'll have nothing," Sulrad sputtered.

"You'll have your life." The young woman reached for his pack and shouldered it next to her own. "Don't try to follow us. If you do, we'll kill you. Consider this meeting a lesson. Better you learn that the roads are not safe from us. We did you a kindness by leaving you alive."

The young woman knelt by Sulrad. "What's that you wear around your neck?"

Sulrad's finger went to the small figure he wore on the thong. It was warm to his touch.

"This is Ran. A vengeful and powerful god."

"A god?" The young woman made a mock face of horror. "Doesn't look like he's much of a god. He can't even protect you."

She tuned to the young man. "Come on. I don't want no god that can't protect its owner. No one would offer even a copper for that."

"Don't follow." She kicked dust into Sulrad's eyes.

It stung like fire until the tears washed it away.



Sulrad lay there in the dust, his head throbbing, his gut aching. How could he be such a coward? How could he let those two treat him like that?

He choked back the road dust. It was bitter and foul-smelling, a mixture of horse droppings and sand. He worked up a mouthful of spit, trying to wash the taste away, but was less than successful. Every muscle in his body ached.

He rolled over, hoping that getting on his hands and knees would offer him a way to stand up without inflicting any further damage to his tender legs and stomach. Why had they kicked him when he had already submitted? Was this their way of punishing him for resisting them?

He snorted. Fight back. He hadn't fought back. Not really. All he had done was lie there and take a beating. He'd spend his entire life doing just that. Was this the way he wanted to continue?

As if to mock him, the figure of Ran that hung from his neck swung free of his shirt.

"Where were you when I needed you?" he demanded.

The statue was silent. But then, had he really called on Ran? His father was quick to invoke the name of Ran whenever there was trouble. Maybe he had been beaten for his lack of faith in not calling on Ran to protect him. Or maybe Ran was trying to teach him a lesson. If Sulrad didn't fight back, he would always be the one receiving the beating. Ran had been there when he had finally stood up

to Merten. Perhaps that was what he wanted now. For Sulrad to stand up for himself. He had magic. He was no helpless child. But his magic was gone.

Or was it?

He had been trying to use his own strength. Perhaps he had misjudged things.

He struggled to his feet and clutched the figure in his fingers.

"Ran, forgive me for my lack of faith. I ask for your protection once more and seek your blessing."

For a moment, Sulrad expected the statue to speak to him. It remained silent, but he felt a pull in his chest, as if something had entered him, not his heart, but the other side of his chest. It was as if he was suddenly filled with energy, power. Was it a gift from Ran? Was it his magic?

He stretched out his hand. "Incendio ignius."

Fire sprang to life.

He looked toward the horizon where two figures walked along the road. The robbers hadn't gotten far. He could still catch them.

Or did he even need to? The image of the trees in flame came to him, along with words he had never heard before. Ran was speaking to him once again. He had found favor.

"Inferre vindictive." As he spoke the words aloud, the fireball sprang from his hand and rushed toward the couple ahead. When it reached them, it expanded and consumed them so quickly that they only had time to let out a single piercing scream before vanishing in a puff of smoke. Sparkling green motes swirled around the blackening smoke as if corralling it into a pillar.

Sulrad took a tentative step toward the pillar, then another, the screams echoing in his mind as he did. Had he just killed the two robbers as he had his own father? Was that what he was now? A killer? But what about Ran? Surely if he had done something wrong, Ran would not have blessed him so. He wished Ran was more forthcoming.

He had killed, but he was certain it was justified. Ran had spoken. Hadn't he?

Before he had taken more than a handful of steps, the pillar of smoke formed itself into the shape of a finger and pointed at him. Was it accusing him? Identifying him to some as yet unseen accomplice of the two young people he had just incinerated?

The thought had barely crossed his mind when the finger rose into the air and came rushing for him. He instinctively placed his arms across his chest, but they offered no protection. The swirling motes drove the acrid black smoke straight for him. Was this the end, then?

The smoke hit him so hard, it knocked him off his feet. The swirling cloud of sparkling green motes entered his chest and vanished.

He sat up.

Was it over?

His chest exploded in pain.

Yes. This was definitely the end.

His world expanded, his senses becoming sharp. Every blade of grass along the road was there, unique in its own way. Every stalk of maize growing in the field had its own life force, its own reason for growing the way it had, and even the dust had a reason to be there precisely where it was at this exact moment.

But that wasn't all. The two robbers. They had been a young couple, newly bonded. Linel, the young man, was a miller, the son of a miller, himself the son of a miller, stretching as far back as there had been people in the land. Sulrad experienced the young man's life. He witnessed the times he had been embarrassed before his friends and family.

Sulrad knew the young man as well as he knew himself, only he had not made the poor choices that Linel had made. Sulrad had never decided to rob a stranger on the road to his new home with his new bride. Sulrad had never decided

to beat a complete stranger and take his possessions. Linel deserved what had happened to him. Sulrad felt no guilt for taking his life.

But the girl was another story.

Hithuar had been a young woman of some renown. Linel had met the girl in one of the towns where her parents traded. They had an on again off again romance until Linel was able to talk Hithuar into leaving her parents and joining him as he struck out on his own. He had finally had enough of his father's neglect and was determined to find a place where he could build his own mill and earn the respect of his peers. She had resisted at first, but with the promise of settling down in one place for the rest of her life, he had enticed her into following him. She was an innocent who had been duped.

Sulrad let the vision drop as he reached the small gray pile of ashes already partially winnowed away by the morning breeze. He kicked at the ashes, hoping to find his pack and purse. A cloud of acrid black dust rose into the air and was quickly wafted away, leaving nothing behind but a scratch in the dust. Had he incinerated his pack and purse along with his knife?

Sulrad ran his foot through the ashes, scattering them to the wind. No pack, no purse, no knife.

He reached up and fingered the statue that swung from the leather thong. "Ran, if you are there, please let me find my purse and my knife."

He kicked at the ashes once more. This time, his foot struck something that went skidding down the dusty road. It was his knife.

He reached down to retrieve it, expecting to see nothing more than the sky iron blade. He had probably burned away the leather thong he had meticulously tied around the hilt, but at least the iron would be intact.

To his surprise, the knife was whole, pristine, as immaculate as the day the smith had completed it and

lacquered the leather handle. How could that be? Was it somehow immune to the wizard's fire?

He slipped the knife back into the sheath at his belt and watched as the remains of the ash were carried away up by the breeze. It was as if the two had never existed. The only memory of them was the heaviness in his chest. Sulrad wasn't certain if that was the weight of the magic he had absorbed from them as he had from the hare, or perhaps it was the guilt he felt over taking a life? He pondered that for a moment before deciding it was the magic. They had robbed him and left him to starve. He was justified in what he had done. The statue at his neck seemed to agree. It nestled against his flesh, cool and calm as if satisfied with his actions. No retribution from Ran for his behavior. That was comforting.

Sulrad turned toward Amedon and the future that awaited him. He was a wizard. He wielded magic like no one he had ever seen. He had vanquished the last of the shame that clung to him for cowering before his father. He was no killer. He had brought Ran's judgment on those who wronged him. Nothing could stop him. No now. Not any longer.

Before he had taken three steps, a cloud of sparkling silver appeared in the air before him. The motes spun in a circle, forming a ring that shimmered and grew ever more solid as he watched. When the ring had grown man-height, it took form. It was as if a silver frame for a glass had been crafted by a master craftsman. Inside the frame, the air rippled almost as if it were the surface of a pond.

Sulrad watched it, wondering what sort of manifestation it was. Was this a direct message from Ran or something else? He sensed no malignancy in its presence.

Best to wait.

The shimmering surface settled down like ripples dying out after a pebble has been tossed into a pond. In the reflective surface, Sulrad saw only himself.

"Sulrad. Come," a voice came from the rippling surface.

"Come where?" he asked.

The voice sounded vaguely familiar.

"To Amedon." The voice was mature but not old. It was confident, as if unaccustomed to being refused.

The wizard who had instructed him to come to Amedon had told him he needed to learn to control his magic. He'd barely had any time to try anything. Why was he being called there now? Why by magic and not over land as he had been told to?

"I thought I was to travel there on my own, to learn the lay of the land."

"Normally, that is the case, but your magic is too powerful to permit you to learn on your own. You need to be in Amedon where we can protect you." The voice paused for a heartbeat. "And those around you."

"If I choose not to?"

"Do not take that path. That way lies danger not only for those you encounter, but for you as well. An untrained wizard is not permitted to roam free. Come. Do not fight this."

A force compelled Sulrad. It took all his will to resist. Still, he found himself taking first one step, then the next, toward the shimmering silver surface. He dug his heels in, but it did no good. His muscles had turned traitor.

He stretched his hand out to fend off the silver surface, but as his flesh encountered it, he was sucked in.

Darkness engulfed him, and the path beneath his feet vanished.

He was falling into a blackness so dark, not even the darkest night could compare.

AMEDON

SULRAD

The falling sensation lasted only a heartbeat. So did the darkness. When it cleared, Sulrad found himself in a room lit by torches set in sconces along one wall. He stood at the head of a long table carved with intricate designs and stacked with tomes and sheaves of parchment. Seated around the table was a collection of the oldest, most withered men Sulrad had ever seen. Each one seemed older than the next. The only one who was not ancient was the man who had appeared in his vision when he had been summoned. That man stood straight and tall, his cropped hair and beard showing only a touch of gray. Something about the way he stood there told Sulrad that he too had been summoned before this body.

"You took a life," the ancient seated in the middle of the table said.

"Sire?"

"You took a life." He glanced down at the parchment before him. "More accurately, you took two lives."

Sulrad didn't know how to answer, so he remained silent. He wanted to make water where he stood. This was the ruling body of wizards. No doubt each of them possessed more power than Sulrad himself would ever accumulate. What was he to say?

"Is this correct?" the man demanded.

"Sire, they robbed me. They beat me. I didn't stop to think. The magic came over me and I reacted."

"I see. We feared as much. With your powers growing as they are, you would soon become a danger to yourself and most certainly to anyone who crosses your path. Was this intentional, but as you say, a lack of control on your part? Can you explain what happened?"

"They robbed me," Sulrad said. "They beat me. They stole my belongings. They left me for dead. They laughed while they did these things to me."

"And you felt your only choice was to kill them?"

"I didn't intend to kill them," he lied. "I thought to frighten them. I raised a fireball and sent it toward them, planning to stop it before it reached them, but it got away from me."

The old man leaned forward in his chair as if examining Sulrad as he spoke. "I can tell when you are not being honest. Is there anything you wish to re-state?"

"Nothing, sire." Sulrad knew he had explained things as accurately as possible. He had left out the part where Ran spoke directly to him, but he'd seen his father ridiculed often enough to know that was something better left unsaid.

"Hmmm. I sense you are holding back, but the words you have uttered are the truth, and not just the truth as you see it, but the truth in an absolute sense."

The old man glanced around the room before continuing. "Does anyone have any questions they would like to put forward to the young man before I announce my decision?"

No one spoke.

The ancient one sat there for a hand of heartbeats, then cleared his throat. "I find that you did not act improperly, and that it was not your intent to take the lives of those who deserved a far lighter sentence. You did use magic against another with malice, and for that, you will spend your first

few moons here in a collar. Perhaps that will temper your judgment, and next time you are presented with circumstances beyond your control, you will think before using deadly force against anyone."

The old man spoke to the one who had summoned Sulrad. "Garlath, take him to his quarters. Attach his collar and see that he is settled in."

"Yes, sire." Garlath gestured toward the doors and they sprang open. "Shall we?"

Sulrad panicked. Quarters? Not the gaol? Did they even have a gaol in Amedon? Was he not to be punished, then? The ancient one said he could detect a lie, but he had not. Or had he? Was he even now being escorted to some dungeon where he would be tortured for his crime? Was that what the collar was for?

"Where are we going?" Sulrad asked. "And what is a collar?"

"The collar is a device that dampens your magic. It's used to temper the power of a new wizard and help him learn control."

"So, I'm to be punished?"

"It's not punishment. Your magic is wild and powerful. Until you learn to control it, you could do damage without even intending to, much as you did with those two who robbed you. The collar dampens your magic so that even if you lose control, you can do very little damage." He smiled. "That does not mean you can't do any damage, just that the chances that you do something deadly by accident are diminished."

"What will I learn?" Sulrad still didn't like the idea of the collar. As they walked down the halls of the great building, he saw young men and old in dark blue robes rushing or strolling along the halls. Most of them had a look of determination on their faces, as if they were headed somewhere on a mission or with a purpose that demanded

immediate attention. He wondered just what all these wizards were up to. They all appeared distracted.

"You're wondering what they are all about, aren't you?"

"You can read my thoughts?"

"No. It's what every new student wonders. These are wizards in training, and this is the main hall where their education takes place. Most of these are young men who have had the power come awake in them, much as you have. Some are more advanced in their training, others not as much. You will join them. If your time here is anything like most, you will soon share that same look of distraction as you come to understand how truly immense is the knowledge stored in these halls."

"I'm to learn to be a wizard?"

"You already *are* a wizard. You are here to learn to control your magic. How to channel it, how to direct it, and how to hold it back when necessary. We don't want a repeat of what happened on the road."

"I'm to live here?" Sulrad had no place to live and no coin. If they were offering him a place to sleep, sustenance, and learning, how could he refuse? Yet something seemed just a bit off to him. As if there was a secret they all shared, and that he was the only one who didn't know what it was.

Garlath stopped before a plain door, unadorned by any design or placard. "This is your room. Sulrad is your name. Is that what you prefer to be called, or is there something else you would like to be known as?"

"Sulrad is my name. Why would I choose something else?"

"Some boys come from lowly beginnings and feel that a common name belittles the lofty status to which they aspire. I don't sense that about you, but it is an offer we make to all students. You can retain your name or you can choose a new name, one with a lofty and pretentious heritage, or you can make something up. It's your choice."

Sulrad paused. Here was his chance to become someone else. He could choose any name he desired. Was that what he wanted? To become someone else? No. He had suffered. He had learned lessons he wished he hadn't. His name had been despised and mocked, but one day, it would be respected and revered. That was fitting. He would keep it. "I'll keep my name, if you don't mind."

"So be it." Garlath waved his hand at the door. A cloud of silver shimmered before vanishing to reveal a brass placard. Engraved in the brass was a set of arcane and ancient symbols.

"It says Sulrad in the ancient wizard's tongue. We use it for special occasions like this one. You will learn it as part of your studies, but for now, remember these symbols. It's how you will find your way back to your room. If you get lost, just whisper your name and hold in your mind the image of this door and a glowing golden thread will guide you back here."

Garlath opened the door. "After you."

Sulrad entered the room. It was smaller than the home he had grown up in, but since he had never had a room all to himself, it felt palatial. A bed stood firmly against one wall. Across from it was a writing desk with a single chair. Beside the desk, a wardrobe stood half a hand taller than Sulrad. Inside was a selection of robes, all dark blue with white bands around the left sleeve. Beneath the robes, a shelf held a stack of small clothes. At least that was what he thought they were. Sulrad had never worn the delicate undergarments favored by the well-to-do folks. Merten said that small clothes were a sin almost as bad as gluttony. No one needed two layers of clothes when one would suffice.

"These are for me?" Sulrad asked.

"Yes. When you change." Garlath raised an eyebrow at Sulrad "And that should be every day. You place your soiled garments here." He slid out a bin from under the desk.

"Someone will collect them, launder them, and return them to the wardrobe."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Garlath asked.

"Why would someone do that for me?"

"Because we pay them to. Your duty here is to learn magic, or more accurately, to learn to control your magic."

A light rap on the door interrupted Garlath.

"Come," he said without looking.

"Wizard Garlath. The collar." A young wizard stood just outside the door. In his hand was a gleaming collar. It looked as if it were made of sky iron. As if the smith had formed a rod about the diameter of Sulrad's thumb and bent that rod into a seamless ring. It had a sheen to it. A shifting pattern rested just below the surface and appeared to move.

"It doesn't hurt," Garlath said.

Sulrad's hand went to his neck as if the collar were already in place. "How does it work?"

"Magic is energy. It flows in patterns that determine how each spell works. The collar interferes with this pattern so that you cannot gather too much magic to yourself, and you cannot discharge it quickly. It tempers your natural flow of magic."

"The flow of magic?" Sulrad recalled how the magic flowed into him when he had taken the lives of the robbers. It had struck his chest. Even now he felt it resting there.

"You gather magic to yourself, and when you cast a spell, you discharge it." Garlath placed his hand over his chest on his non-heart side. "Right here. There is an organ that controls the magic. It collects magic and stores it. When you cast a spell, you use up the magic. It takes time to recover."

"But doesn't that limit the magic I can use? How then am I to learn magic? I thought that was why you brought me here. Won't that get in the way?"

“At first, but as you mature, you will learn how to draw magic from the world around you, and how to store it outside of your body. It’s a skill few master, but I have a suspicion that you will learn it much sooner than most.”

There it was again. Garlath spoke as if Sulrad were somehow different from the other students, as if he possessed magic that most did not. All his life, he had been told he was nothing. A nobody. His mother had left him because of his magic. His father beat him for it. Now he was being told he was special because of that same magic? How could that be? He was a nobody. As if to remind him where the power really lay, the statue at his neck bumped his chest. Ran was listening, and it didn’t sound as if he liked what he was hearing.

“Come.” Garlath snapped the collar open and extended it toward Sulrad. “This truly will not hurt, and it will greatly accelerate the learning process. Trust me. I know of what I speak.”

“You wore one of these?” Sulrad asked.

“Two summers. I was a slow learner with great power. Some days I thought I’d never be rid of the thing, but one morning I woke and decided it was time. I reached up and took it off, and that was it. The day will come when you do the same. When that happens, you will be a force to be reckoned with.”

At those words, the statue of Ran grew warm.

Ran liked those words.

STUDIES

SULRAD

Sunlight streamed in the window, brushing Sulrad's face. A gentle breeze blew in through the open window, setting the thin drapes fluttering, carrying the scent of wood smoke along with them. For a moment, Sulrad lay there, letting the sun warm his face. It was nice to sleep in. To not be responsible for the morning meal. He wondered where Merten had gone and when his father would return. Hopefully, it would be late in the afternoon. With any luck, Merten would have made a sale in the market by then and be in a passable mood. In the meantime, Sulrad could sleep, if only for a short while.

He pulled the covers around himself. They were soft and supple. That wasn't right. His blanket was coarse and scratchy.

He sat bolt upright. Where was he?

He glanced around the room.

Small room.

Bed.

Desk.

Wardrobe.

The sound coming in through the open window carried not the sounds of the forest and meadow but a bustling cacophony of voices. Merchants calling out the virtue of

their wares. The cackling of caged hens being prepared for sale in the market. It was market day. In Amedon. He lived in Amedon now. He'd been here for almost a moon and he was still getting used to the idea.

It was market day and that meant no classes. No instructor. No fellow students poking fun at his manner of speaking. No inscrutable characters carefully drawn on the blackboard that Sulrad had yet to decipher. Today he was free. Free to do whatever he wished, but what did he wish? To be back home? That was not going to happen. His home was gone. Nothing but a pile of ash beside a poorly maintained path on the outskirts of a small town that nestled against a small estate far from the bustling city of Frostan.

No. That part of his life was over. He was a wizard. A trainee, but a wizard. He had magic. If they would ever let him use it, that was.

Sulrad kicked his legs free of the entangling blanket.

The floor was cold.

The floor was always cold. The stones sucked the heat from his feet and sent a shiver up his spine.

Sulrad slipped on the sandals he'd been given along with the small clothes. Those remained folded in the wardrobe. No small clothes for him. Ran looked down on those who pampered themselves. Sulrad donned his robe and ran his hand through his hair to straighten it. He would go to the market. He had coins. Two silver. More than Merten earned in half a moon from his carvings. More than Sulrad had ever possessed. They had given it to him. For no more reason than that he was a student. A stipend they called it. Due him twice a moon. What wonders were available in the market for riches such as these?

He would soon find out.

A rap came at his door.

Who could that be? Sulrad had met a few students in passing, but none that would come calling. Was it an

instructor? Garlath, perhaps. Why would they come to his door today? Did that mean no day off?

"Who is it?" Sulrad called.

"Don't you know how to see through your door?" came the muffled voice.

"Very funny. Go away."

"Sulrad, you need a guide to the market. If you're not careful, your stipend will be gone and you'll be sitting penniless for the next half a moon. I'm going to show you who to watch out for and where the best bargains are. Come on. Open the door."

The voice sounded vaguely familiar. A student. Not an instructor. Sulrad was in no mood for conversation or company. He could look out for himself.

"They have sweet-meat pies," the voice said.

"I don't eat meat."

"What? Why not?" the muffled voice asked.

Was the boy going to stand there all day trying to have a conversation with him? What would it take to make him go away? Silence?

Sulrad sat down on the bed and composed himself.

If he remained absolutely silent for long enough, the boy would no doubt grow bored and leave. How long? He counted heartbeats, mulling over in his mind the few lessons he had taken an interest in. Reading was something that he needed to learn. The brush strokes that formed the characters were starting to make sense, if only slightly. Sulrad had already learned the characters that represented the names of the instructors as well as his own. He imagined himself drawing out one of the characters. Fire, it represented. The brush strokes almost made sense when he thought of them. The wavy lines that represented the flames. The thick stroke below that represented the log being consumed, so why was the character for consumption so different from fire? Were they trying to make it difficult to learn? Was that it? The wizards guarded their knowledge

by inscribing it in scrolls and books, using the most bizarre collections of characters imaginable that took moons of dedicated study just to learn the basics. How many summers would it take him to master the more complex spells contained in the library?

It made his head hurt just thinking of it, but it had occupied him for a while. It should be safe now.

He listened carefully.

No more rapping.

No comments from behind his door.

The boy had probably grown bored and left long ago.

Sulrad rose and opened the door to find a boy standing there as if prepared to rap. It was a student from one of Sulrad's classes. Potions and herbs? He couldn't recall.

The boy was about the same height as Sulrad, dressed the way all students dressed. The same robe, the same stripe, but that was where the similarities ended. The boy was heavy. His face round. His hands thick. The rope that tied his robe shut seemed to dig into his flesh.

"I knew you were up for a trip to the market," he said.

"Were you standing there the whole time?"

"Yes. I was waiting for you. I knew you would come out eventually."

"Who are you? Why are you here?" Sulrad asked.

"I'm called Kelnor. I'm here to escort you to the market and keep you from being cheated."

He reached for Sulrad's shoulder, but Sulrad backed away.

"Come on. They took advantage of me on my first trip to the market. I'm not going to let them do that to you."

"Why do you care?" Sulrad asked.

Kelnor shrugged. "No one cared about me when I arrived. I don't want them to take advantage of you. Besides, you look like you could use a friend."

"I don't," Sulrad said.

"You will. Come on."

Sulrad stepped around the rotund student.

"I won't."

"You will." Kelnor rushed to catch up, matching Sulrad's stride as he walked the hallway that led to the main entrance of the housing building. The main hallway was wide, as it afforded dozens of students to make their way to the market with ease.

"Ever wonder why this hall is so large? Why the doors are so tall?" Kelnor asked.

"No."

"They're built for dragons. Because when they built Amedon, there were dragons here. They helped raise the stones that make up this very building. Imagine that. Dragons. Right here."

"There are no more dragons." Sulrad had heard the tales. The dragons had built Amedon along with the wizards, but one day, they left. The reason was never actually mentioned. Some speculated that the dragons had taught men all they could and had left to permit man to develop on his own. Others said they had died out when magic died. Those tales spoke of days when magic was everywhere and everyone could do magic, if only a little. Still others hinted that there was something much more sinister. That the dragons had been forced to leave. Sulrad paid those tales little heed. When he asked his instructors about it, they said that one day he would be ready to learn, but until then to focus on his assigned studies. Learn to read. Learn to heal. Stick to the courses the wizards had laid out for him.

"So, you've had the course about dragons?" Sulrad asked.

"Not yet."

"Then how can you know?"

"The library." Kelnor skipped ahead and turned backward to look at Sulrad as he spoke.

"Library?" Sulrad asked. "What's a library?"

"The place they keep the scrolls and tomes?" Kelnor's face took on an exaggerated look of surprise. "Are you telling me you have never even heard of the library?"

Sulrad shook his head.

"Then we're not going to the market. Plenty of time for that later. You need to see the library." Kelnor grasped Sulrad's arm and turned him back the way they had come.

"But I wanted to visit the market."

"To purchase what? What do you need that you don't already have?"

"I just wanted to see the market. It's my day off. I don't want to study."

"We're not going to study. We're going to see the library."

Kelnor led the way out the rear of the housing building and across the yard to the bridge that spanned the chasm separating the main complex from the tower. The great tower stood alone on an outcropping of rock and could only be reached by traversing a span of stone that appeared all too narrow for Sulrad's taste.

"Come on. It's perfectly safe." Kelnor stepped out onto the stone bridge and jumped up and down. "See?"

Sulrad peered over the edge and down into the chasm. It was deep. Half a league, if his guess was any indication. Far below him, birds swooped through the air, a small bird darting and bobbing as it tried to escape a larger one intent on having it for its next meal.

"Coming?" Kelnor asked. "Or are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid." Sulrad placed one foot onto the bridge, then another. It felt solid. No swaying. No movement whatsoever.

"Come on." Kelnor turned and raced for the massive double doors that stood open at the base of the tower.

Sulrad let his gaze take in those doors, then made a mistake. He looked up.

The tower stretched into the sky itself. Clouds rushed past. The tower was falling! It was about to come crashing down. Sulrad grew dizzy as his gaze took in the swiftly moving clouds. He took a step without looking back down.

A hand tightened around his arm.

"Forgot to tell you. Don't look up."

Sulrad was so shaken, he paid scant heed as Kelnor led him through the entrance and along a wide hallway that took them past the rear wall and beneath the stones of the mountain on which the tower was perched. It felt like they had been walking for a glass or more when they encountered a guard.

"No students," the guard said.

"I have a special pass from Garlath." Kelnor fumbled at his sleeve and withdrew a small sheet of rolled parchment. He handed it to the guard.

The guard examined it, re-rolled it, and handed it back to Kelnor. He turned to Sulrad and stretched his hand.

"I'm with him," Sulrad said.

"Not beyond this door, you're not. This section is reserved. Not for general students."

"Why him and not me?"

"He has the blessing of a senior wizard. I take it you don't?"

"No. How do I get that?"

The guard shrugged.

"Come on. Over here." Kelnor led Sulrad to an archway off the main hall. The room beyond was large, with racks holding scrolls and tomes stretching to the ceiling half a dozen spans overhead. In the center of the room were a series of tables, each one flanked by half a dozen chairs. Most of them were empty, but one or two held wizards bent over scrolls, quill pen in hand as they scratched down information gleaned from the great library.

Adjacent the tables were a group of upholstered chairs flanked by small tables.

"Here." Kelnor tugged at Sulrad's arm, leading him to one of the chairs.

Sulrad took the proffered seat.

"What brings you here?" Kelnor asked.

"You did."

"No, not here. Here. What brings you to Amedon?"

"The wizard Garlath."

"Was the trip difficult? How long did it take you?"

"It didn't. The wizard Garlath brought me here."

"Through the void?"

"Yes. He came and got me. I'd barely even had time to begin the journey."

Kelnor shook his head. "I'd heard rumors. That's why you wear that, isn't it?" Kelnor gestured to the collar around Sulrad's neck.

Sulrad shrugged. He had little inclination to reveal just what he had done to earn the collar.

"So your magic must have come awake in you in some dramatic way. Tell me. How did it start? When did it start?"

Sulrad looked the boy over. He appeared genuinely interested. What harm could come of sharing his story? He'd leave out the parts about being beaten and how Sulrad had set fire to his own home and killed his father, but the fire and the girl. Those were safe to tell, and perhaps the boy could shed some light on just what had happened. He'd tried to see the girl again, but so far, his efforts had failed.

"I felt the fire. I lit a candle. I saw a girl in the flame. Then it was over. Not much to tell."

Kelnor was on his feet. "You saw a girl? In the fire?"

"Only for a moment."

"No wonder they brought you here straight away. You're a great one. I knew it. I felt there was something different about you." He took a theatrical bow. "Your Mightiness."

"What are you talking about?" Sulrad was just a bit afraid. Was this boy unhinged? Was he mad? Sulrad was a

nobody. A poor boy from a poor family in a poor town in the middle of nowhere. He was no mighty one.

“Pairs. Do you know about Alwroth and Uskin? They run the council. They run Amedon. They’re paired. A sorceress and a wizard who work together. You’re the next one. You’re paired. You and this sorceress you saw in the fire. It means you are meant to be. To work together. To run the council until some future generation brings forth another pair.”

“What are you talking about?”

Kelnor drew a breath. “You haven’t had the class yet, but when a wizard and a sorceress reach equal power and their paths cross, they can become bonded. Their magic and life threads intertwine. They can draw on each other’s power. Imagine that? To be able to command twice the power of a single wizard, some say even more. You saw her. The same night your power came awake. What more of a sign do you need?”

“I think you read too much,” Sulrad said.

“Mark my words, wizard Sulrad,” Kelnor said. “You are meant for greatness.”

Sulrad shook his head. What a preposterous thought. Who would believe such a thing? Not him. But then why was the statue of Ran so warm lying against his skin?

MARTIAL

The eight moon of Sulrad's stay in Amedon meant that he was now considered a second summer student. He had completed his basics and was ready to move on to more advanced classes, one of them being warfare and combat. He'd been assigned to an afternoon class with a wizard by the name of Relt. Relt was wiry, with leathery skin that spoke of too many days in the sun. He wore his hair in a single queue that stretched halfway down his back. Instead of a classroom, Relt taught in a large space cleared of all but a woven straw mat. Along the lines of the windowless room were racks of practice weapons. Staves, staffs, swords, maces, and knives in more shapes than Sulrad had ever imagined.

Sulrad entered the room while Relt was engaged with another student. The student was slightly older than Sulrad, with sandy brown hair. He stood facing Relt holding a staff.

Relt bowed to the student, then turned to address Sulrad and the rest of the gathered students. "Fantul here is my best student. He believes, incorrectly, that he has mastered the staff. I'm going to show you all the proper way to handle a staff, then you are going to go up against him one at a time."

A student raised his hand. When Relt acknowledged him, he timidly asked, "If he does not know what he is doing, why is he the one to teach us?"

Relt smiled. "Because you certainly don't want to come up against me until you have at least an idea of what you are doing." He stepped back from Fantul and nodded. "Observe."

Fantul raised his staff and flexed his knees. He kept his gaze firmly fixed on Relt.

The man appeared completely uninterested in his opponent. His end of his staff rested on the mat just beside his foot. "Who sees the first mistake Fantul is making?"

Relt cast his gaze from student to student. "Anyone?"

Sulrad felt the weight of that gaze as it landed on him. Was Relt taking in the fact that Sulrad alone wore a collar? Would that help or hurt his chances of learning anything in this class?

Without taking his eyes off Sulrad, Relt flicked his staff with his foot, sending the end sailing out. He grasped the opposite end of the staff and swung the heavy wooden rod over his head with a whistling sound. The staff contacted Fantul's not half a digit from his fingers before the boy even had a chance to blink. The impact sent a sharp crack echoing off the walls and knocked the staff out of Fantul's hands. In the blink of an eye, Relt's staff swung around and stopped, poised a digit from Fantul's neck.

"Fantul's mistake," Relt said, "was to think that his opponent was not watching. Never turn your back on an enemy or think for one moment that he is not paying attention."

The same student that had asked the previous question raised his hand once more. When Relt nodded to him, he asked, "Even if he had been watching, how could he have stopped such an attack?"

"An excellent question. Who has any thoughts?" Relt's gaze took in the students, once again landing on Sulrad.

“How about you, sky iron boy?”

Sulrad squirmed. With Merten, silence often cooled his anger, but something about the way Relt stared at him said silence would only make matters worse. “He should have been watching for your staff to start in motion, even though it was not directed at him.”

Relt straightened up and cast his gaze at the students once more. “Is he right?” he demanded.

When no one answered, Relt tapped his staff on the floor and launched it at Sulrad. “Sky iron here is right. Why don’t you show us how it’s done?”

Sulrad snatched the staff from the air and stood. He took a step toward the mat, but Relt held up his hand. “Sandals off.”

Snickers came from the assembled students as Sulrad knelt down and removed his sandals. He stepped onto the mat, pausing for a moment to take in the roughness of the woven straw. It would give him solid footing. He slowly walked across the mat to face Relt.

Relt smiled. “Aren’t you full of yourself?” He grasped Sulrad’s shoulders and turned him to face Fantul. “Not me. Him. Hold your staff out like he is.”

Sulrad leveled the staff.

Relt bent down and whispered into Sulrad’s ear. “Don’t watch the eyes. Watch his heart. His chest. That’s where first movement will come from. The eyes are liars. The body is not.”

Relt straightened up and stepped back. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Sulrad did as told. He kept his gaze focused on Fantul’s chest even as the boy started to sway from side to side.

Fantul took a step toward Sulrad, his foot slapping the mat with a pronounced crack.

Sulrad stepped back, gaze still on Fantul’s chest.
Wait for it.

There it was. A slight ripple in the boy's muscles as he tensed up in preparation to strike. It was almost as if a shade of the boy had separated from him and started moving even before the boy did. Sulrad saw where the staff was headed half a heartbeat even before Fantul started to move. Sulrad dropped back another step, extending his staff farther from his chest.

As Fantul's staff whistled toward him, Sulrad drew his staff back matching the position where the shade was half a heartbeat before the real staff struck.

Fantul's staff barely nicked Sulrad's as it passed.

Sulrad stepped forward, raising his staff to fend off the blow he expected from his left side.

Fantul shifted his weight, grasped his staff with both hands, and swung wildly, striking Sulrad's staff with a pronounced crack.

The vibration stung Sulrad's hands, but he managed to hold on and bring his staff up to fend off another blow as Fantul struck again, this time straight overhead.

Sulrad raised his staff to block the oncoming thrust.

Fantul shifted his strike, knocking Sulrad's staff down, then whirled around.

The staff caught Sulrad on the head.

He saw stars.

His legs turned traitor.

He crumpled to the ground.



"He's awake," came the voice from the fog.

A hand reached behind Sulrad's head and lifted it just enough to slide the pillow beneath it.

"That was quite a bump you took there." The voice belonged to a woman Sulrad had seen around the keep. Her name was Curran, and she was the healer that tended

the minor injuries most boys were prone to acquire in the normal course of their daily lives. She reminded Sulrad a bit of his mother. Before she learned he had magic.

She raised a cup of broth to his lips. "Drink this. It will help."

As the salty broth touched his tongue, Sulrad spit it out.

Curran scowled at him. "How do you expect to get well if you refuse to eat?"

"I don't eat meat."

"It's good for you. Don't consider it meat. Think of it as medicine."

"No meat."

"Never?"

"Not unless I kill it myself."

"Do you need me to go fetch a hare or a fowl so you can butcher it? Will that make you feel better?"

"No. I have to catch it myself."

"I'll have the wizard Garlath come see you. Perhaps he can talk some sense into you."

"It matters not." Sulrad wasn't about to let anyone, not even the wizard Garlath, talk him into violating one of his basic precepts. He was certain that Ran would heal him without the broth, even if it took a bit longer than the healer preferred.

"Suit yourself." Curran took the cup and withdrew.

As she opened the door, Kelnor brushed past her carrying a mug that sent wafts of steam into the chill morning air. "Vegetable broth. Salted. No meat."

Kelnor offered the cup to Sulrad.

He sipped it. Carrot. Sage. White onion. Salt. No meat. He drank it all down, hot as it was.

"I knew you would be hungry," Kelnor said.

"What happened?"

"Fantul. Or more truthfully, Relt. Fantul was just the weapon he used against you."

"Why would he do that?"

“He does it every time a new class forms. He chooses the most promising student and tortures them to put them in their place. You should feel honored.”

Sulrad rubbed the bump on his temple. It was still soft and hurt like fire.

Kelnor leaned in and whispered, “They said you used magic.”

“How could I? Did you forget?” Sulrad reached up and touched the collar.

Kelnor shrugged. “You should be able to perform magic even with that collar on. It just dampens your magic, not stop it altogether. How would you learn to control your magic if you could never touch it?”

This time, it was Sulrad’s turn to shrug.

“Try it. See if you can’t raise fire. That’s so simple, surely you can do that by now. You’ve been in that collar for ages. You must have mastered a few simple spells, even with diminished powers.”

“I’m too tired to try.”

“This will help you heal. Using magic has a therapeutic effect.” Kelnor reached into his pocket and withdrew the stub of a candle. “I brought you a candle. Just like a boy whose power has just come upon him. Fire. Light the candle.”

Kelnor held it before Sulrad’s eyes.

“If I try, will you go away and let me sleep?” Sulrad asked.

“No. But try anyway.”

Sulrad tried to recall what it had been like when he first called up fire. He had been sitting there in the dark wishing for the fire when the words came. Strange, now that he thought about it. Those words were the same ones taught in Amedon. Where had he learned them? At the time, he hadn’t given it much consideration, but the words must have come from somewhere. Ran? Had Ran spoken directly to him? What other explanation could there be.

"Incendio ignius," he muttered.

The candle burst into flame.

"There, you did it," Kelnor remarked.

"Quiet. I'm not done." Sulrad felt elated that he was able to do some magic with the collar on, even if it was small. What had he done to direct the fire? He tried to recall the words.

"Ostende midi," he said.

The thin thread of smoke from the candle began to curl in on itself, no longer rising into the air. It twisted and turned, creating a small sphere. The sphere grew thicker and thicker as more and more smoke wrapped itself around the candle flame. Suddenly, the smoke turned clear. It was as if Sulrad was gazing into a crystal ball.

"Where are you?" Sulrad muttered. There was only one person he had ever seen in the fire before. Could he bring her back? He opened his mind to the possibility. She would be there. She had to be.

An image formed in the crystal.

A stone wall.

A family crest.

A bed.

Sitting on the bed was the girl. He'd found her.

She turned toward him. "I thought you were dead."

"No. I'm in Amedon." He flushed. Should he tell her about the collar?

She leaned in as if squinting at him. "Why are you so fuzzy? I can barely make out your image."

As she spoke, the image started to waver.

He was losing control.

He panicked.

"Who are you?" He had to know.

The girl in the crystal sphere paused. "I'm Rotiaqua. Rotiaqua Reik."

She emphasized the name as if Sulrad should have recognized it. When Sulrad didn't respond, she leaned

forward, her face becoming clearer. She had grown since he'd last seen her, her face taking on a more mature appearance, and her hair was longer.

"You're talking to a royal?" Kelnor's voice intruded.

"Be quiet. I'm losing her," Sulrad said.

The image wavered again. Before he could get in a word, it vanished.

She was gone.

"See. I told you." Kelnor said. "Mighty one."

SEEKER

SULRAD

It had been half a season since Sulrad had tried to reach the girl. Rotiaqua, he reminded himself. On several occasions, he had attempted to contact her again, but the collar kept him from it. Only lately he had started to sense a way he could use his magic without activating the spell on the collar. He locked the door to his room and waited for night to fall. It was cool, but not yet cold. The winters were so much colder in the mountains of Amedon than they were at home in Frostan. He would never get used to the snow. Not if he lived to be a hundred.

Enough self pity. He had work to do.

He sat at his desk, lamp unlit. No time to call attention to the fact that he was still awake. Deep in the night, it was almost silent in Amedon. No students roaming the halls with their noisy banter. No noise from the square where merchants called out the quality of their goods. It almost reminded him of home at times like this.

Perhaps that was the secret. He imagined himself sitting before the hearth at home.

For half a heartbeat, he felt the sting of realizing that his home no longer existed, but he pushed the thought away and concentrated.

"Fire," he whispered the words.

A tension grew in Sulrad's chest. A constriction. Something was there. His magic?

As the power radiated out from his heart toward his fingertips, a counter spell arose from the collar damping it out.

"Curse you, Garlath." As he spoke the words, the statue of Ran that hung from his neck twitched.

"You have something to contribute?" he asked.

The statue was silent, but a thought crept into his head. Garlath had taught him to shield his magic. What if he used a shield to separate his magic from that of the collar?

He imagined himself clothed in shimmering light. Just the thinnest layer of gossamer. The collar remained inert.

He extended the gossamer clothing out from his hand to encompass the lamp that sat on his desk.

"Fire," he said. "Incendio ignius."

Once again, the magic stirred within him. It tingled as it rose from his chest and meandered along his arm to exit his fingers. The vermillion thread was almost invisible, it was so small, but it was there.

He guided it to the lamp wick. "Incendio ignius," he repeated.

The lamp flared to life.

Sulrad sat back, exhausted.

He'd done it.

He'd accessed his magic even with the collar on. When Garlath told him one day he would take his own collar off, he had thought the wizard was only placating him, but here it was. The day had come.

He shook off the thought. Contact. That was what he was after.

He sat forward and gazed into the flame.

"Show her to me."

The wick flared. The fire danced about it, forming itself into a small globe.

"Show me."

An image formed in the fire. Fuzzy, indistinct as if something interfered with it.

"Rotiaqua?" he called out.

The image settled. It was her. Asleep on a large bed.

"Zhimosom?" She sat up and peered into the air before her.

"It's Sulrad."

She squinted. "You woke me."

"I'm sorry. I only just learned how to use my magic to reach you. It's been so long since we spoke."

Rotiaqua blinked. "I truly thought you were dead this time. Where have you been? Why haven't you contacted me?"

"I'm still in Amedon. I've been collared. It suppresses my magic. I've only just discovered how to defeat the spell."

"Why did they do that?"

"To help me learn." Sulrad flushed. He didn't want to tell her the real reason he had been put in the collar. If she knew, would she think less of him?

"You've grown," she said. "You're a man now." She rubbed her chin.

Sulrad reached up and rubbed his own chin where the hairs were starting to thicken. He hadn't taken to shaving as some students did. He preferred his face in its natural form.

"How have you been? Are you safe? Hale and hearty? You are not in the same room as before," he said.

"No. I am in the castle now. My father has asked me to come home. He has great plans for me, he says."

"In Frostan?" he asked.

"Yes. You know Frostan?"

"I grew up not far from there."

"You know my father?"

"No. I rarely left the farm, and when I did, it was only to visit the market and return home quickly."

"That's for the best. My father hates wizards. He puts them to death. He would burn you if he caught you. It's best you stay in Amedon." She leaned in. "He has an amulet that lets him control a wizard."

Sulrad touched the collar. He knew about control.

"You look different," she said.

"You said I've grown."

"No. That's not it. Your magic. It feels different somehow."

"It's probably the collar." Sulrad was growing uncomfortable. What was she getting at?

"No. It's your magic. It's muddled. Mixed. I didn't see it before, but now I do. It's not pure."

Sulrad flinched. "How would you know?"

"I've met other wizards."

"I thought I was the only one you were able to contact this way."

"You were. Now there is another."

"This Zhimosom you spoke of?"

Rotiaqua's brows wrinkled. "He's a wizard. Young. Only recently come into his powers. But his magic is different from yours. It's pure. You're—" She paused as if searching for words. "Not."

Sulrad sat back. His magic was not pure? Had she sensed the power he had taken from the thieves on the road? She must have. And now she was spurning him for it. She had found someone else. Someone pure.

"It's nothing to worry about," he reassured her. "It's probably just the collar."

"I'm not so sure about that." She glanced off to the side. "I have to go."

"Wait. I still have so much to ask you."

"Oadry will see you. I promised her I wouldn't do magic. Not here. Not in the castle." She waved her hand in the air and the image vanished.

HEALING ARTS

Sulrad could hardly believe he'd been in Amedon for a full season. Winter had come and gone in the mountains, and Sulrad was assigned a new batch of classes, and he was late. He still got lost at times trying to find his way. He pressed through the throng of students that flooded the halls. The day had turned warm already and was filled with the scent of lilacs that had recently bloomed all around the grounds. The overnight rain left a sheen of wet on everything and made the heat all the more oppressive. He stepped around a pair of younger boys, arms linked as they laughed and tussled on their way to who knew what class that first summer students were required to take. As he spun to avoid tripping, a hand snaked out between the passing wizards and struck him on the head. Not hard, but hard enough to hurt.

Sulrad spun to see a small gaggle of older students passing by.

"Who hit me?" Sulrad demanded.

"Who hit you?" one of the boys asked innocently.

"Yes. Who hit me?"

"What kind of wizard can't detect something as simple as that?" Fantul stepped from the midst of the boys. "Oh, that's

right. You're not a wizard. You're a slave." He ran a finger across his throat, then pointed to the collar Sulrad wore.

"I'm no slave," Sulrad said.

"Oh? Then prove it." The boy held out his hand. "Raise fire. Like a first year. Show me you're a wizard."

"I don't need to show you anything."

"That's because you can't."

Sulrad had played this game so often, it was growing wearisome. At first, he had grown angry when taunted. That only made matters worse and encouraged them. Why had he even bothered to stop this time? Was it because he had started to sense that magic leaking out from the collar? What would they think if he demonstrated how he did have control of his magic if only on a small scale? He could raise fire. He'd been practicing alone in his room. Small, intense, brilliant. Almost strong enough to melt the sky iron collar. They had told him that when he was truly ready, he would be able to remove the collar himself. That day was nigh. He could feel it. But now was not the time. Not yet.

He took a deep breath while he formulated an appropriate response. That simple act was enough to give him pause. Why bother?

Sulrad turned and walked off, leaving Fantul standing in the middle of the hall, hand outstretched.

When he found the classroom where his studies were to take place, Sulrad grabbed for the door, but a hand reached around him and yanked the handle, almost striking him.

"Let me get that for you." A slight figure with long sandy hair pulled the door open. She turned to him, a wide grin on her face with a hint of mischief. "You were just standing there. Wool gathering?"

"Just thinking." Sulrad's hand reflexively touched the growing welt on his head where the student had struck him.

"I can take care of that." She jutted her chin at Sulrad's head.

"Take care of what?" His face grew hot.

"Never mind, then." She stepped into the classroom.

Sulrad followed her, looking around for an empty seat, but there was only one. Far in the back beside the girl. Kali was her name. He'd heard of her. She was one of the few women in Amedon. A wizard on par with the best of the boys, she was often treated no better than he was.

Sulrad took the seat next to Kali.

"Welcome. Welcome." The instructor, Saysha, was a middle-aged wizard with jet black hair and a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. He stood beside a stack of books, his hand resting lightly on the top one.

"Herbs. Bark. Roots. Petals. Hips. Fungus. Lichen. Each one of these has their own properties that in the right hands can be prepared to heal most maladies. You will each learn the names of these substances, where they are commonly found, and how to prepare them."

Beside him, Kali groaned. "How are we supposed to memorize all that? Who can know where all those plants grow?"

"Haven't you spent time in the woods? That's where the most common ones come from. Some of them grow in the fields and meadows, but not as many. The woods is the place to find most of them."

"I've never been to the woods." She shuddered. "Only once on my way here and I'm in no hurry to repeat that experience. It was an awful place, full of strange sounds and bugs and spider webs."

"Kali? Something to share with the class?" Saysha asked.

"No."

"Good, then you can begin. Please retrieve the top book."

She stood, but Saysha made a pressing motion. "With magic. It is part of the lesson."

Kali sat back down and placed her hands flat on the table. She squinted at the pile of books, her hand rubbing the back of her neck, foot tapping on the floor.

For a moment, Sulrad thought she was going to fail. What sort of wizard was she if she couldn't do such a simple spell? She wore no collar. She would have had access to her magic. Why so nervous?

"Kali?" Saysha crossed his arms and scowled.

"Just a moment." Kali raised her hand and opened it. "Et cum," she whispered.

The top book tore itself free of Saysha's hand and shot toward her like a bird in flight. She reached up and grasped it, bobbing backwards with the impact. She set the book on the table and placed her hand on top of it as if seeking to hold it in place.

"Why don't we use magic to heal?" a student across the room asked. Sulrad had seen him around but had no experience with the boy.

"You have plenty of magic to spare?" Saysha asked.

"I do all right."

"Good, that makes you a prime candidate. Come up here, lad."

The student strolled to the front of the class, glancing around as if to make sure all eyes were on him. When he reached the front, he paused, facing Saysha.

"Turn to the class. I want everyone to see your face."

"Cause I'm so handsome," the student quipped.

"Cause you are going to be so instructive."

"That's me." He pointed to his chest. "Instructive."

"You certainly will be." Saysha turned back to the class. "We learn herbology because magic is precious. I know you as youngsters think magic is all powerful, but by now, you should know it's not. You have your own personal store, and when that's gone, what are you going to do?"

He reached into his pocket and drew out a large medallion, half the size of his hand, brass and heavy.

"This is spelled with two spells. The first is an acceleration spell to spin the disk. The second is a spell to keep the disk from breaking apart as it accelerates. I want you to invoke these two spells and watch what happens." He handed the medallion to the student.

When the boy gave him a confused look, Saysha leaned down and whispered in his ear.

"Ego autem invoke," he said.

The disk rose into the air and hovered at the level of the boy's chest. He smiled broadly as the disk began spinning. "See. Plenty of magic."

"Give it a moment," Saysha said.

The disk began to spin faster. The edges started to blur.

The student lost his smile.

Sweat broke out on his forehead.

The disk started to whistle and wobble.

"Focus," Saysha reminded the boy.

The student's forehead wrinkled. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His face grew red. Still the disk accelerated, the whistling sound growing stronger and higher in pitch.

Sulrad thought he was going to have to cover his ears when, suddenly, the noise stopped. Saysha snatched the disk from the air and caught the student as he collapsed.

The boy wobbled for a moment, then recovered. He had a sheepish look on his face.

"Now. Take your book and return to your seat."

The boy reached for a book, but Saysha stopped him. "Magic?"

The student groaned and glanced at the stack of books. He stretched out his hand, but nothing happened.

"Do any of you need to experience this for yourself?" Saysha asked. "Or is this enough?"

Heads shook around the room.

"Good. Come get your books. Magic or no. It's your choice."



Sulrad found the study of herbs and potions to be enthralling. He already knew where most of the plants grew that the text mentioned. He'd come across them often enough. Some, he'd been warned were inedible. Now he knew why. They contained strong medicine that could cause harm if handled incorrectly but could be used to heal the body if one knew what to look for.

He had learned several ways to prepare most of the healing potions and balms and what to substitute if one could not find all the ingredients. He was starting to feel like he'd mastered most of the potions and harboring a bit of pride in his accomplishments.

It only made matters worse when word got around that Sulrad was becoming a star student. The anonymous strikes in passing grew more frequent, his tormenters, bolder. On his way to class this afternoon, someone had struck him so hard, his head started to bleed. When he reached the classroom, Saysha greeted him with a shake of his head.

"Why do you take such abuse?" he asked.

"I have no powers. I wear the collar because I retaliated once before. The next time, it may not be a collar, but a noose they put around my neck."

"Fine. Today we will use you as an example, if that is all right with you."

"What sort of example?"

Sulrad recalled the student whose magic had been depleted. He was in no mood to be made fun of like that.

"It's totally benign, I assure you, and you'll end up with a proper healing for that head wound."

Sulrad reached up and wiped away the drop of blood rolling down his temple. "I suppose it couldn't hurt."

"Fine. Go take a seat up front and let the class settle. Then we can begin." Saysha reached into his pocket and

withdrew a kerchief. "In the meantime, you could use this."

Sulrad accepted the kerchief, pressed it to his head, and took his seat.

When all the students were seated, Saysha stood beside him and began. "We are fortunate to have a live example today. Not that the circumstances are acceptable, but since we have this opportunity, we will learn from it."

Saysha pointed at Kali. "Young Sulrad here has a head wound that won't stop bleeding. What would you recommend?"

"Clean the wound with brandy, then coat it with honey," she replied.

"And if that didn't work?"

"If it is too severe, stitch it with cat gut then honey and maybe compress of onion to draw out the infection."

Saysha pointed to Sulrad's head. "If you can't stitch it?"

"Magic?" Kali asked.

"Precisely. Today we start using magic to heal. I trust that everyone has read the spells used to heal a flesh wound?"

Sulrad glanced around the class. Most of the students were nodding, a few turned red.

"Sulrad. You've read the text?"

Sulrad winced. Of course he'd read the text, but what was he supposed to do with the collar around his neck. He couldn't do magic on that scale with the collar on.

"I have, but." He touched the collar.

"I see. Just a moment." Saysha grasped the collar with his thumb and forefinger.

Sulrad tried to discover what the wizard was doing. It was difficult to detect, but it looked as if the wizard had raised a fireball. Tiny, barely more than a quarter digit in diameter. He'd used that fireball to soften the sky iron, somehow restricting the magic between his fingers despite the fact that his power was being drawn into the sky iron. That was the secret. Sky iron absorbed magic, but somehow

the wizard was able to hold on to his. If Sulrad could master that skill, perhaps he could remove the collar or at least direct a spell without his magic being absorbed by it.

The wizard muttered under his breath, and the collar parted.

Sulrad's skin tingled. It was as if he were being eaten alive by an army of ants.

"Give it a moment," Saysha whispered.

The magic rose from every pore in Sulrad's skin. The hair on his arms and legs stood on end, each bristle straining to escape his flesh. The room grew brighter, the color more brilliant. The air became richer, each breath filled with energy.

"Now. Can you recall the healing spell for a wound?" Saysha was saying.

"Certainly."

"Then let's see it in action." Saysha nodded at Sulrad's head.

"Omnis caro venial." Sulrad spoke the words of the spell he'd memorized.

A violet glow appeared in the air before him, a small shimmering ball of light that was barely visible. He guided the light toward his head, feeling a tingle as it touched his flesh.

Nothing happened.

The blood still trickled down.

"Is there a problem?" Saysha asked.

"It's not working."

"No. It's not," Saysha stated. "The first rule of magical healing. You can't heal yourself."

He glanced around the room. "Kali. Why don't you come up here and show these wizards how it's done?"

The girl came forward and extended her hand.

"Just a moment." Saysha reached out and examined her hand. Satisfied, he jutted his chin toward Sulrad. "Just

making sure you are not injured. We don't want any wizards mixing blood here."

"Why not?" she asked.

"That's for a later class. For now, just make sure when you heal someone that you don't mingle your blood. Not until you are much more powerful."

Her brows furrowed.

"It's fine. Please continue with the healing," Saysha said.

Kali intoned the same words Saysha had. The same violet ball of light appeared. She pressed the ball of light into Sulrad's temple.

The bleeding stopped.

"Excellent job," Saysha said. "You may take your seat."

Kali glanced at Sulrad as if he had done something to upset her. How could that be? He hadn't asked to heal him, but even if he had, how was that such a bad thing? He shook his head. He would never understand.

When he took his seat beside Kali, he leaned over and whispered, "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not you. They think because I'm a woman, all I'm good for is healing. I'm a wizard. I can do anything any of these boys can do, and probably more."

"Ran cares not if you are a man or a woman," Sulrad said.

"Who?"

"Never mind." Sulrad gathered his books in preparation to leave. As he stood, Saysha cleared his throat.

Sulrad glanced his way.

The wizard stood holding the sky iron collar. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Sulrad slumped to the head of the class and lowered his head. He'd let the wizard return the collar to its usual place around his neck.

For now.

COLLAR

SULRAD

Sulrad sat in his room fingering the collar. Saysha had removed and replaced it so often that Sulrad was starting to understand the spells used to fuse the iron into a single piece. He was certain that he understood the spell and was eager to try it out, but he was fearful that there might be a secondary spell on it so that removing it would alert Garlath that he had done so. He would wait. If he had learned nothing else in Amedon, he had learned patience.

Kelnor burst into his room without so much as a knock. When Sulrad first met the rotund student, he had not cared much for the boy. Kelnor was intrusive and constantly inserting himself into Sulrad's path. When Sulrad learned that Kelnor was different from most students, he had accepted the boy's offer of friendship. Coming from a wealthy merchant family, Kelnor was used to being either shunned or taken advantage of by those around him and maintained that Sulrad was the first student he'd met who cared little for his wealth or position. "Coming to eat?"

Sulrad had grown accustomed to eating three times a day, but he avoided meat he had not killed with his own hands, trying to keep the same solemn vow that his father had made to shun gluttony in all its forms. When he did eat,

he chose a sparse meal, forswearing the heavy meats and sauces and restricting himself to vegetables and water.

"What's the fare?" he asked.

Kelnor swung his hips into Sulrad, almost knocking him down. "Why do you care? You never eat much of anything."

The boy was rotund and carried a layer of fat the likes of which Sulrad had never seen. At times, Sulrad wondered what it must be like to be covered in fat. Was it a burden, like wearing a heavy coat? Was Kelnor constantly aware of the extra weight he carried, or was it something he'd grown accustomed to?

"It's a sin to eat more than you need," Sulrad said.

"So, I'm a sinner, am I?" Kelnor asked.

Sulrad felt his face go red. Kelnor was as close to a friend as he had. Was he prepared to lose his friend over this? Not really, but he had to say something. He couldn't just sit idly by and watch Kelnor sin and not at least attempt to show him the path of Ran.

"You are," Sulrad said. "But perhaps there is hope for you, yet. You don't have to eat meat you have not killed yourself, and those root vegetables. Surely one is sufficient."

"I'd rather be a sinner than starve." Kelnor led the way to the dining hall. "My own father said that eating was a pleasure to be enjoyed. Not that there's much to enjoy around here."

As Sulrad entered the dining room, he caught a whiff of the evening's fare. Roast boar with a thick brown gravy.

"Smells good, doesn't it?" Kelnor asked.

"Not to me."

Sulrad glanced around the room. There was only one table with empty seats. Right across from Fantul. He winced. "I'm not hungry," he said.

"Yes, you are. Come. He won't do anything in the dining hall. Even he's not that foolish."

"I'd rather not."

"And have him claim he frightened you away?" Kelnor headed straight for the table and sat down across from Fantul.

Sulrad reluctantly took his seat next to Kelnor.

When he had, Fantul reached up and ran his finger along the collar of his robe. Clearly, he was making fun of the sky iron Sulrad wore.

"Is there a problem?" Sulrad asked.

"No. Should there be?" Fantul replied.

"Were you making light of my collar?" Sulrad felt the anger rise up in him, and along with it, the magic. The collar seemed to have less of an effect on his magic when he was angry.

"Not that it matters. There is precious little you can do while you wear that thing. What got you collared? Casting spells on the lasses in town? Trying to make gold from nothing?"

The students seated around Fantul laughed. All gazes turned to Sulrad.

Sulrad reached up and ran a finger around the shining iron. "You know what this is, don't you?"

"It keeps a weak-minded wizard like you in his place," Fantul replied.

"It dampens my magic while I learn to control it."

"So you say. I've been told those are for students who are too dull to learn their lessons. That they are there to remind the rest of us to study, and only the senior wizard can remove them when they think the student has learned enough." Fantul leaned in closer to Sulrad. "You should get used to that thing. It looks like you will be wearing it for a long time."

"Or not." Sulrad reached up and grasped the collar in his hands. He focused the magic that had so recently risen in him on the iron, forming the tiniest of fireballs that softened the metal. The collar opened soundlessly, two

shimmering silver crescents joined by an almost invisible hinge.

"You want it?" Sulrad held the collar out to his tormentor.

Fantul backed away so quickly, he knocked over the bench, sending his companions to the floor in a heap. Sulrad returned the collar to his neck and re-fastened it. The joint he had created was indistinguishable from the one Garlath had made when he first put the iron around Sulrad's neck.

A hand touched Sulrad's arm.

"Don't do that again. Someone may tell the senior wizard about your little show. There are worse things than a collar, you know." The look on Kelnor's face said it all. The boy was truly worried for Sulrad.

"All right. I'll remember." Sulrad served himself a small portion of root vegetables and greens.

"I don't see how you can live on that." Kelnor piled his plate with roast, root vegetables, and bread. He slathered the bread with a thick creamery butter and covered the whole collection with the dark gravy.

Just the thought of all that food made Sulrad's stomach queasy. How could the boy eat so much at one sitting? There was enough food there to feed Sulrad for half a moon. He stabbed at the root vegetable and tore a chunk off with his fork. Not for the first time, he wished for his knife. Where had they put it? He was sure that it was still intact. He could feel it if he tried hard enough, but where was it and how would he retrieve it when the time came to leave, for leaving, he was certain, was in his future. Maybe not in a moon or even ten, but Amedon was not the sort of place Sulrad saw himself long term. He had thought his days of humiliation had ended, but here in Amedon, there was an endless supply of young wizards eager to prove themselves at his expense.



That night, Sulrad lay awake in his bed. Why had he shown off his ability to remove his collar? Why hadn't he kept it a secret? He'd let the taunts of another student push him into revealing something he meant to keep to himself. Someone was bound to tell the tale of what had happened in the dining room. By morning, everyone would know that he was no longer subject to his collar. What that brought, he was uncertain of, but it couldn't be good. If only he had his knife.

The sky iron knife had been on his mind lately. He felt as if there would soon be a need for it. It was his, after all. He had found the sky iron. They had no right to take it from him.

He reached up and removed the collar. If everyone knew, then there was no reason to keep up the charade. Let them feel his magic.

He cast about, searching for his knife. It had to be somewhere. If he could locate it, he could craft a plan to retrieve it.

He imagined the knife, let his thoughts recall every detail of it as the smith had worked the raw chunk of sky iron into a bar, then flattened it, folding it in on itself time and time again. He had told Sulrad that this process strengthened the iron, not that sky iron needed such strengthening, but it was a process that he followed with every blade he made.

In his mind's eye, the iron glowed brilliant orange as the smith withdrew it from the fire. Each strike of the hammer gave off a ringing, each blow slightly different from the one that preceded it, each ring unique and distinct from every other one. When the blade had finally reached the final shape, the smith had fired it and quenched it, water, oil, and finally, blood. Each one had its own properties, and each one imbued something new to the blade.

Finally, cool and roughly shaped, the smith had taken it to the stone. Careful not to let it get hot, he had removed the rough flaked exterior and revealed the smooth iron surface below.

It had taken days for the smith to finish his polishing, and even then he spent another morning honing the blade before finally handing it over to Sulrad.

Sulrad remembered the way he had tested the blade against his own flesh, letting the brilliant sky iron shave the hairs off the back of his arm as if it possessed magic.

As the image grew stronger, Sulrad felt a tug. Was it the knife calling to him?

He allowed his senses to drift along, following that tug until he located the knife. It was in a sealed room lined with stones gathered from all over the land and shaped until they fit together without mortar. The sky iron knife rested in a drawer near others much like it. The wizards were hoarding the sky iron, keeping it for themselves. How many students had they robbed? Were they any better than Hithuar and Linel?

Sulrad called to the knife as if he were calling a sheep home from pasture.

The knife wriggled in the drawer but remained where it was.

“Ran. Help me.” Sulrad touched the statue that now resided in the drawer in his room. The collar around his neck was enough to cause him grief. He didn’t need a second symbol of his difference reminding everyone he followed an obscure and ancient religion.

The statue grew warm in his hand.

Once more, Sulrad reached out for the knife, this time grasping it in his imaginary hand. He saw himself open the drawer and lift the knife free. He turned and passed through the room as if it were nothing more than mist. In his mind’s eye, he saw the knife float down the hallways until it reached his own door. There it paused for a few

heartbeats, then slipped through the wood as if it were not there.

Sulrad held out his hand and welcomed the blade home.

There. He had his magic. He had his education. Amedon held little more for him than his own home had. It was time he took matters into his own hands. He'd thought long and hard about it. Finally, he'd decided and now. With his knife, he could set his plans in motion.

BUTCHER

SULRAD

Early the next morning, while the dew still covered the land, Sulrad took the first step toward his freedom. He'd removed his collar. They had said that when the time came, he would. He'd learned all he could, so why not leave? As of late, his studies had become more and more arcane, more and more useless. Who even needed a spell to preserve the appearance of a flower indefinitely? What a waste of magic. He was done. There was nothing left to learn. Not for him. And the constant torment he underwent? There was no reason to endure that any longer. It was time.

Sulrad recalled the feeling that he experienced when the wizard summoned him to Amedon. He recalled how the magic had spun itself into a golden portal filled with shimmering silver that led to the void. He brought to mind the sensations that accompanied it, a slight chill as if someone had opened a door and closed it quickly after realizing how cold it was outside. He dug for the memory of the sound it made, a slight whistle that rose in intensity and frequency as the golden frame grew more solid. The shimmering in the air, the ripples on the surface, the hesitation he felt before stepping forward. He tried to make

everything the same. That wizard had drawn on something to open the portal. What was it?

All around him, Sulrad felt the power of raw magic. Was that why they had chosen this place to build the wizards' city? There was power here deep beneath the earth if he could only harness it, draw it forth. There had to be a way. Why wasn't he able to call it up?

"Ran. Why do you mock me so?" he demanded. But the statue remained quietly nestled in the drawer beside his small clothes.

Was it a test of his faith? Had Ran forsaken him because he had forsaken Ran?

He yanked the drawer open, retrieving the leather thong and tiny statue of the wizened old man. Not for the first time, he noticed how Ran resembled the ancient wizard who presided over the council. Or was it the other way around? Was it the wizard who emulated Ran?

No matter. The statue settled around his neck, its comfortable weight a constant reminder of where his faith lay.

This time when he reached out for the magic, it came to him as if happy to do his will. The portal formed in the air almost before he could imagine it happening.

Where would he go?

There was only one place *to* go.

He'd go home.

He stepped up to the portal and thrust his hand through.



The woods appeared around Sulrad after a brief sensation of falling. It felt nothing like the last time. Had he been transformed by his own magic? This time, there was no long, drawn out stomach-wrenching fall, no cold, no dark, just a brief moment of disorientation and then he stepped

out into the woods where the sky iron had come to rest. It was the first place he could think of that was bound to be devoid of people. And people, wizards in particular, were the last thing he wanted around him this morning.

The sun had just risen. Strange how that was. Amedon was nestled in the mountains, and the sun was not yet above the craggy horizon. Here the sun sat on the horizon, a huge orange ball just starting to shed its heat on the day. The dew weighed heavily on the grass and brush that carpeted the floor of the woods — everywhere but the great gash where the sky iron had landed.

Sulrad's stomach growled. He was hungry and had grown used to eating as soon as he woke. He knew it was a sin to desire food, but it was hard to ignore the angry protestations of his stomach.

He had left a few snares in this place. Maybe he could set them and catch an unwary hare. If luck was with him, he would soon eat his fill. If not, then there were always roots about. He could dig up a few and roast or boil them. He wouldn't go hungry, of that he was certain.

He quickly located a snare and deftly reset it. More snares meant more chances of catching something. He set about making another one. Using his sky iron knife, he sliced the bark from a supple branch and used the bark to form the cord that would be the main component of the snare. He had just about completed the cord when a scream arose from the brush. Was he that fortunate? Had he caught a hare already?

Sulrad parted the brush. Sure enough, a huge hare had stuck its head into the snare and was struggling to free itself, tugging against the cord, but the cord was staked to the ground. It wasn't going anywhere.

Sulrad placed his hand on the rabbit's back.

It emitted a piercing scream and struggled all the more.

"That's enough of that." Sulrad drew his knife, grabbed the hare by the ears, and sliced its throat with a single

stroke. The blood spilled out onto the ground, the crimson splashes standing out against the rich green of the foliage.

Sulrad's stomach growled as if reminding him of his need.

"Soon," he muttered. "Soon I will feast."

He leaned closer to the hare, waiting for the rush of blood to stop before he skinned the animal. But as he drew close, the blood turned to a swarm of sparkling green motes, thrashing about the struggling hare as if mimicking its movements. The motes rose from the ground and formed themselves into a tight ball of glowing green, hanging in the air as if waiting for something. For him. Sulrad called to it, willing it to come to him and fill him up with its magic. The glowing sphere hesitated. Did it wish to continue on its way? Had he forgotten the words he needed to speak? Why hadn't the magic filled him as it had done once before?

Sulrad glanced up. The sun was rising higher in the sky. A shaft of light broke through the foliage and struck a rock that had been torn from the earth when the sky iron had landed.

He slapped his head. Sunlight. That was it. He'd forgotten that there had been sunlight. From the setting sun last time, but sunlight was sunlight. Morning or evening could be no different.

He lifted the hare by the ears and hauled it over to the rock where the sunbeam struck. He flung the hare into the light and called to Ran to empower him with the animal's magic.

This time, things were different. The blood turned to sparkling silver motes that drove straight for his chest. The now familiar feeling overwhelmed Sulrad for a moment. He was gorged on the magic. It was more power than the last time he had done anything like this. Was he learning better how to absorb the magic? Was this hare more powerful or was it the sky iron?

He let the feeling play out for a hand of heartbeats. Why were things different this time? Was it the proximity of the sky iron? Had they missed a portion? Was it something else?

He dressed the hare and laid it out ready to cook, but he was no longer hungry. He was intrigued by the way the magic had behaved. It felt different. He was going to have to play with his new powers, see what they could do now that he was free of Amedon.

Before he had much time to try, a shimmering portal opened before him, and a hand reached out and grabbed him by the throat.

The hand yanked him into the shimmering silver, and once again, Sulrad was falling.

DISTURBING

GARLATH

“T ell me. Had you heard the rumor that your student removed his collar in the dining hall only a few glasses before he summoned his sky iron knife and fled through the void?” Alwroth glared at Garlath, his eyes smoldering with rage.

“No.” Garlath faced the senior wizard. Alwroth was known for his outbursts, but he was also known to be fair and honest. The truth was the best avenue in this instance. No excuses were possible and none would be accepted.

Garlath took a breath and continued. “The first I heard was when he vanished. It took me a few glasses to discover he’d gone. I wasn’t familiar with the area, but thankfully, he chose a location that I had already been to. Had he gone anywhere else, things might have gone differently.”

“And what did your charge do while he was out there on his own?”

“He sacrificed a hare and took its magic. It worries me. He is already so powerful, I fear I could not stand up against him. What happens when he takes power from another? Surely he poses a true danger, not only to us, but to anyone he happens across that raises his ire. I’m not sure I’m up to the task of bringing him into the fold, as it were.”

Alwroth laughed. "If you are not up to the task, none of us is. I have confidence you can handle him. I presume you have already set his course of education to direct his interests?"

"I have. He is once again in a collar. When I attached this one, I used his own magic, so he won't be able to remove it without help. I will be watching him closely and personally counseling him, but I fear we may not be able to salvage this wizard. The boy has some strange notion about an old god that his father worshiped. He seems to be skeptical about it all, but he wears the idol around his neck and is convinced that this Ran is a living deity and acts directly in the lives of his followers."

"Have you not explained things to him?" Alwroth asked.

"I have, but the boy is a true believer. He believes that this Ran has already interceded in his life. He credits the deity for bringing him the sky iron and teaching him how to use it."

"Preposterous. How can he believe such a thing?"

Garlath shrugged. "Faith?"

"I leave his training in your hands. See that you guide him along the *correct* path, won't you?"



"Egrid, send a boy to fetch Kelnor, would you please?" Garlath had paced the halls deciding how to handle Sulrad and finally hit upon the plan he was about to lay out. He'd made his way back to his study to find that Egrid had already lit the fire, brewed a pot of strong tea, and fetched a plate of sweet-meat pies from the kitchen. He was almost convinced that she could read his mind.

"You think the boy will be able to influence this Sulrad?" she asked. "That one seems such an odd duck."

"Sulrad comes from a poor family. He's had a hard life," Garlath said. "His mother left when the boy showed signs of magic awakening. His father was killed in a suspicious fire."

"Sounds like many a boy who arrives here."

Egrid sat down across from Garlath and snatched a piece of parchment off his desk. Taking the quill from his inkstand, she quickly jotted down a note. "I'm asking whichever master is in charge of Kelnor's education to release him to you for a brief time. I'm sure there will be no problem."

Garlath glanced at the note. Her handwriting flowed and curled almost as much as her deep red curls, nothing like Garlath's block script.

She folded the parchment and lifted the small hand-bell that Garlath kept beside his quill and ink. She gave it one shake, and a young boy appeared. He had none of the signs of power about him that most students had. Perhaps that was why she had chosen him. Running errands on her behalf would not interfere with his studies.

The boy took the note, nodding as Egrid explained which student she sought. He bowed deeply and backed out the door.

"You certainly have him trained," Garlath said.

"Most boys, like most men, respond favorably to even a tiny bit of attention." She reached up and brushed her hair behind one ear. "And I have plenty of attention to go around, but back to the boy. What makes this Sulrad so different?"

"His father was a religious man. Believed in some god named Ran. Thought that this Ran punished him for his sins and rewarded him for his faithfulness. He was an ascetic. Shunned any form of rich food or strong drink. He really warped the boy, and of course Ran doesn't hold with magic, so when the boy started to show signs of the power, his father stepped up his abuse. Yet despite all that, young Sulrad believes that Ran has now taken an interest in him.

He's decided that Ran has blessed him in some manner and has allowed him to use magic without it burdening his immortal soul."

"How strange. I'm sure that doesn't help him get along here."

"No. He's bright, brighter than most, and powerful. That already sets most of the boys against him. He's dirt poor and not sure how to behave in most social settings. He refuses to eat meat that he hasn't caught and killed on his own. Says it's a sin. The other boys laugh at him. Or at least they did until he removed his own collar. Now they're a bit hesitant around him."

"Isn't that a good thing? Maybe that's all he needs, a little respect."

"I'm not sure. He has me baffled, that's for certain."

Egrid shook her head, a cascade of red curls emphasizing her movements. "You'll get it sorted. I know you will. Let me pour you a mug of tea, unless you'd prefer something stronger?"

"Stronger if you have it."

Egrid rose and crossed the room. She pushed on a plain panel in the wall, and it popped open. Nestled in the hidden alcove was an ornately cut glass bottle with a similarly intricate stopper. Inside the bottle was an amber fluid that sloshed as she carried it back to his desk. "I've been saving this for a special occasion." Egrid poured a small amount of the fluid into a glass, then replaced the stopper.

"You're not joining me?" Garlath asked.

"Not without an invitation," she said. "Was that an invitation?"

"I hate to drink alone."

"And I'd hate to see you drink alone." She poured a second glass, slightly less than the first. She re-stoppered the bottle and lifted the glass. "Students. Without them, life would certainly be boring."

Garlath lifted his own glass, touching hers. "Students."

He downed the drink in one swallow. The fluid was sweet with just a hint of pepper. As it slid down his throat, it came alive. He inhaled sharply and almost choked on the fumes. It felt like his throat was on fire. While Egrid had no magic, she certainly had a way with the spirits. He reminded himself not for the first time to take care when she poured for him. The last thing he needed was to lose his composure in front of a student. He shuddered and struggled to retain his composure as the potion sharpened his senses and heightened his perceptions. Why she joined him, he never understood. On a mundane, the potion was nothing more than a strong drink that burned one's throat. "You could have warned me," he said.

"Didn't think you'd needed it."

Egrid tipped her own glass and emptied it in one gulp. She smiled at Garlath without a hint that she experienced the same burning as he had. The smile that spread across her face was a bit too smug.

A rap on the door. "Wizard Garlath?"

"Come in," Garlath called, trying to mask his gasping breath.

"You sent for me?" The boy who appeared was pudgy verging on obese, yet he carried himself with a grace that bore witness to a proper upbringing in a wealthy family.

"Yes. Take a seat."

At his words, Egrid rose and turned for the door. "Ring when you need me. I'll leave you two to speak in private."

She turned to the boy. "There are sweet-meat pies if you feel a bit peckish."

"Thank you, ma'am." Kelnor's gaze followed the redhead out the door, then flicked to the sweet-meat pies before settling on Garlath.

"Kelnor. I have a task for you."

"Always happy to help," Kelnor said.

"Glad to hear it. I have come to understand that you and Sulrad are close?"

"Sulrad doesn't have any real friends. He keeps to himself most of the time, and even when he's in a group, he doesn't speak with the other boys. They barely know anything about him, so how could they be friends?"

"Well. You're as close to a friend as he has. That's why I called you here."

"Did I do something wrong?" The boy's eyes flicked to the sweet-meat pies, then back again.

"No. You did nothing wrong. You'd like to help Sulrad, wouldn't you?"

"He's rather an odd duck, but that doesn't mean he won't make a good wizard. I'm not sure what I can do to help."

"You seem like a solid young wizard." Garlath consulted a parchment on his desk. Egrid had placed it there the first time she mentioned the boy. It contained a list of classes and an assessment from each of Sulrad's teachers regarding his progress. The boy was doing well, much better than expected.

"You are doing well in your studies. You have a flair for languages. Perhaps you can use that to help generate a positive interest in young Sulrad. Take him under your wing, as they say, introduce him to the languages you love the most. See if you can't get the passion fires burning for the ancient tongue that you exhibit such a mastery of."

"You want me to teach him languages?" Kelnor asked.

"If you would. See if you can't spark an interest in him. Introduce him to some ancient texts. See if that gets his blood going like it does yours. You'd be doing the school a great favor. I'd be grateful if you would."

"I can but try."

"Good, but it won't be easy. Sulrad is back in the collar again, and this time, it's more restrictive. We've taken away one of his prize possessions, and he's not happy with us. I'm hoping you can help him accept his new role here and maybe help him fit in a bit with the other boys."

"I can try, but I can't promise anything. He's got some strange ideas, as you already know." Kelnor glanced at the sweet-meat pies, then back to Garlath. "Who doesn't eat meat? Or sweets?"

Garlath laughed. He gestured at the plate of sweet-meat pies and it rose, bobbing through the air, pausing in front of Kelnor. Garlath nodded at the platter. "Go ahead. They're for you."

"Thank you." Kelnor picked up one of the pies and bit into it. A smile crossed his face as if he hadn't eaten in days.

"Let me know how things are coming with Sulrad and don't let on that we've talked. Try to make him think it was your idea."

"I'll try, sir."

"And Kelnor?" Garlath stood.

"Yes."

"Take the sweet-meat pies with you."

LANGUAGE LESSONS

SULRAD

Sulrad tugged at the collar. It had been over a hand of moons since it had been placed there. It was different from the first one and whatever Garlath had done was keeping it fast in place. Nothing Sulrad did to loosen it made even the slightest bit of difference, and so far, he was unable to raise enough magic to defeat the spell. The collar wasn't coming off, no matter how hard he tried.

"You might as well get used to wearing it," Kelnor said. "Besides, how bad could it be? We're not allowed to do magic unless we're in class or specifically asked to. It's not like you're missing out on anything. Come. Look here. Let me explain how this works."

Sulrad glanced around the great library to see if anyone was listening in on them. He had a feeling that Garlath had set spies to watch him and make sure that he stayed on the straight and narrow, as Garlath called it. It was worse than having the statue of Ran sitting on the mantel scrutinizing his every move.

The room Sulrad and Kelnor occupied was one requiring special permission to enter. Accordingly, there were few students there. Shelves covered the walls from floor to ceiling, each one containing a dozen or more cradles where scrolls rested. Attached to the shelving was a ladder that

ran on a polished wooden track so that one could roll the ladder to any section along the wall with the push of a finger. When they had first been granted permission to enter the room, Kelnor had made a game out of climbing the ladder and shoving off with his foot to see how far he could roll before coming to a stop. When one of the senior wizards caught him at it, they had been barred from the room for half a moon.

"Here. Look at this symbol," Kelnor was saying. He sat hunched over a large tome that bore the symbol for congruence. It was a symbol that had taken Sulrad a long time to understand, as many of them had. At first, they looked like lines drawn at random angles, but after a while, he began to see the images they represented, and then to grasp the meaning of those symbols.

"This here is the ancient wizards' tongue. It's vastly different from common." Kelnor turned the tome so that Sulrad could see what he was pointing at. The characters drawn on the page bore no resemblance to the characters Sulrad had already learned.

"These," Kelnor traced the lines that made up the figure, "are guidelines for a spell."

"A spell? What sort of spell?"

"This one creates fire. You're already familiar with it. When you speak the words, you also have to imagine the fire. It's your imagination that brings the fire forth, but what if you can't imagine something? What if you wanted to create fire, and you'd never seen fire, or you have a spell that does something like calling a wild animal from the woods, or making someone fall in love with you? How would you go about imagining such a thing? There is nothing to be seen."

"You tell me. It sounds like you already understand this. It's foreign to me."

"That's because the wizards' tongue is not spoken. Not really. It's more about the pattern, the pattern you use to

channel the magic into the form you wish." Kelnor traced the lines again. "This pattern means fire. See?" He touched a wavering line that did look somewhat like fire.

"How do you say the word? Is the word the same as in the common tongue?" Sulrad was proud of himself for having learned to read the common tongue. His instructor said he had never seen a student learn to read so quickly. But this was nothing like that.

"When you hold the image in your mind, the words come," Kelnor explained. "That's how it works. When you first called fire, did you hear words? In your mind?"

"It's been so long ago, I barely remember," Sulrad lied. It had been such a startling moment that he would never forget, but it didn't happen the way Kelnor described it. Ran himself had whispered the words Sulrad needed directly into his ear. It was Ran who gave him the words, not some figure scrawled in a book.

"Here. Try to imagine this figure hovering in the air in front of you. Picture it as a collection of golden strokes being brushed into existence by an imaginary hand. Visualize it taking shape and see what happens. You will be surprised."

Sulrad did as asked. He imagined a golden brush floating in the air before him. The brush dipped in a pot of ink that had conveniently appeared just when it was needed. Slowly, the brush inscribed the strokes. Thick golden lines of glistening paint hung in the air as Sulrad pictured the invisible hand guiding the brush along.

As the figure neared completion, a voice whispered in his ear. "Incendio ignius," it said. Not the way Sulrad pronounced the words, but with a different emphasis and a rolling of the tongue.

"Incendio ignius," Sulrad repeated.

The image in the air burst into flames. Golden strokes of ink melted and dripped onto the table.

"Good. Did you hear it?" Kelnor asked.

"I heard something."

"You heard it. You know how I know you did?" Kelnor bounced in his chair. "Because you pronounced the words correctly. No one gets them right without the magic speaking to them. You, my friend, are a master at this."

"What good will that do? I still have this collar on. What good does learning magic do without being able to practice it?"

"I'm not taking it off you," Kelnor said.

"I didn't ask you to," Sulrad spat.

"It's for your own good, but consider this." Kelnor said. "Did you not just perform an incantation to call forth fire?" He leaned in closer and whispered, "While wearing a collar?"



The next morning, Sulrad rose early and partook of the sparse morning meal he allowed himself, little more than gruel with a few raisins in it and a cup of strong tea. He shunned the cooked meats and sweet treats that filled the dining hall with their cloying aroma almost as offensive as that of the sweaty young wizards who packed the hall with their crumpled blue robes jostling for position when the kitchens opened. He avoided them as much as possible. They looked down on him and made fun of the cursed collar he wore. Ever since Kelnor had shown him how to read the ancient wizards' script, he had searched for a spell to remove the cold iron from around his neck. He had learned so much, yet none of the spells were strong enough to remove the collar. None of them could even make so much as a scratch on the sky iron.

There had to be a way. Garlath had told him that someone else would have to remove the collar, that it was tuned to Sulrad's magic this time and immune from any

spell he could throw at it. Garlath had been right. Sulrad could make no progress against this new collar. It had become his only focus. Get out of the collar. Get out of Amedon. Get away from the wizards who would keep him in bondage for the rest of his life if their treatment of him so far was any indication.

Surely the secret lay somewhere in the grand library. Sulrad took to spending every free moment of his time there, poring over the ancient scrolls until his eyes blurred. He learned spells to bring about healing, spells to influence cattle, spells to change the weather. Most tantalizing of them all were two classes of spells that he had found mentioned in one of the older scrolls. The first one would enthrall someone, particularly someone of a weaker mind than the wizard performing the spell.

At first, it made no sense. It appeared as if the one casting the spell simply spoke slowly and clearly, telling the victim that they were sleepy and that their mind was drifting. According to the text, this was repeated over and over again until the victim's eyes glazed over, then gradually, the words were changed to whatever the wizard wished the victim to believe.

The second spell was very obscure, mentioned only once. The strokes that formed the text were so faded, it was hard to make them out. He wasn't certain that he fully understood it, but the characters that made up the spell looked vaguely familiar. The spell was used to take power unto oneself.

From where, the scroll did not say. It simply said that when power was free and unharnessed, a wizard could take that power into himself. The figures were simple, but the text also carried a dire warning, one that was even more faded than the figure itself. It almost appeared as if something would come along with the magic, as if it was not simply power that would be transferred, but something more, something to be avoided at all costs.

Sulrad re-rolled the scroll and placed it back in the dustiest corner he could find. He had considered for a moment stealing it so that no one but him would know what it contained, but the library was monitored and any theft would be dealt with very severely. Better not to take a chance.

"What was that?" Kelnor asked.

"What was what?"

"The scroll. I saw you returning a scroll. What were you studying?"

Sulrad quoted the text he had been reading. "The mesmeric arts."

"Mesmeric arts? What is that, some kind of painting or drawing?"

"No. It's a way to influence people to get them to do whatever you want them to do."

"Sounds like some powerful magic."

"That's the strange thing. It isn't magic. It's something else. Something that doesn't require any magic at all."

"Why would you want to study that? There are plenty of compulsion spells that do use magic."

Sulrad shrugged. He certainly wasn't going to explain his plan to Kelnor. The boy had repeatedly refused to help him remove his collar, and if Sulrad was correct, the mesmeric arts would help free him, who knew when else it might come in handy?

"Seemed like an interesting scroll," Sulrad muttered. "What are you talking about? Aren't you the one who is always reading something useless? What was that you discovered last week? How to hatch a dragon's egg. Now there is a useless spell if ever I heard one."

"You never know when such a thing might come in handy," Kelnor said.

"There are no dragons. Haven't been for ages. As far as I'm concerned, all those stories are just a bunch of made up tales to impress the girls."

"Speaking of girls," Kelnor said. "Want to head into town tonight and have dinner at one of the local inns?"

"I don't care much for inn food," Sulrad said.

"If not for the food, then for the entertainment. I hear there is a minstrel there who sings like a nightingale. I could use something other than the school's fare. Surely your god isn't against a bit of levity?"

"No. Not as such, but frivolity is to be avoided."

"Then take a scroll with you. You can study while I eat." Kelnor tapped the scroll resting before Sulrad. "Maybe your mesmeric arts can enthrall one of those minstrels and make her fall in love with me. Not forever, mind you, just for the night. Think you can handle that much?"

Sulrad gestured at Kelnor's enlarged middle. "Always thinking of your desires, aren't you?"

"If not me, then who?"

"Indeed. Who will worry about your desires if not you?"

"So it's the inn, then?"

"Fine. I'll go with you, but I'm not eating that greasy fare they serve there. Root vegetables and greens and don't push the rest of it on me."

"Agreed. You can have my greens. I don't care much for them myself. Don't forget your scroll. You just might learn a thing or two while I dine."

Sulrad gathered up the scrolls he wished to study in more depth. He could secure permission to remove them from the library if he acted as if they were nothing more than general treatments on magic. He was certain that the librarian could not tell when Sulrad was lying. He'd tested it more than once. Yes, he had learned a thing or two.

MINSTREL

SULRAD

For the next half moon, Sulrad practiced his new skill. He had made the trip to town with Kelnor more than once, polishing his technique on Kelnor, the servers and even strangers who happened to sit at table with them. He maintained that he had no love for either the town or the inn, but he continued his visits. It provided him an excuse for what he had planned. No one would think it odd to find him off the school grounds, and off the school grounds, he could touch his magic in a way that he could not while within the great walls of the wizards' keep. It drove home how the wizards of Amedon were keeping him in subjugation and strengthened his resolve to find a way to get the collar off.

Finally the day came when he felt he was ready. Between classes, he headed for the dining room. The midday meal had just been announced and Sulrad was ready to put his plan into action. He had practiced his manner of speaking, rehearsing the things he intended to say, freshened his robe, and even combed his hair. He loaded his plate with an assortment of meats and sausages, even though they made his stomach a bit queasy.

When he took his seat beside Kelnor in the dining room, the rotund wizard was already halfway through his own

generous meal. He had split a half a hand of sausages the long way and smothered them in fried cabbage, the green leaves cooked to translucency and browned at the edges. Sulrad shuddered. Why did the kitchen have to overcook even the vegetables?

"Hearty meal today?" Kelnor asked when Sulrad took his seat.

"I'm feeling a bit peckish, yes."

"Is that meat?" Kelnor jabbed at one of the two sausages Sulrad had chosen.

"If you can call it that."

"I don't know what's gotten into you. First you spend all your time locked away in that dusty old library, now you're eating meat. Next thing you know, you'll be joining the students in town to sing with the minstrels."

"Let's hope not."

Sulrad tried to avoid eating, but the students he was waiting for were delayed and he would look the fool if he just sat there. He chose a leaf of cabbage that had no browning on it and deftly sliced it from the remainder, careful not to let the meat gravy touch it as he raised it to his mouth. Salty with a hint of cardamom, the flavor burst to life in his mouth. It almost made him gag. How could someone eat like this every day? He only hoped it was enough of a distraction to serve his purposes.

"The sewer rat eating meat today?" Fantul took the seat across from Sulrad. He had adopted the moniker for Sulrad after Sulrad had arrived to the table wet from a conjuring gone wrong. Fantul had said he looked like a sewer rat and taunted him the entire time.

"It's quite good," Sulrad lied.

"You going to eat that or take it back down the sewer to your rat friends?" Fantul asked.

"It's not for me. It's for you."

Fantul snorted. "I'd rather starve than take food from a sewer rat like you. What would make you think I'd eat

that?"

"Because you love the food here. Because you can't resist the sausage. I've heard you say that often enough."

"Says you," Fantul said.

"No, listen. Listen to my voice," Sulrad said. "Listen to my voice, let it flow over you."

"You think you're so fascinating," Fantul said. "You think I care what you have to say?"

"Listen to me." Sulrad reached for the magic he was able to squeeze through the collar. He had rehearsed what he was about to say. It was supposed to be working.

"Listen to the sound of my voice," Sulrad said.

In his mind, he formed the figure he had practiced until he knew every detail, every brush stroke of it. If his research was correct, this figure should direct the meager magic he was able to wield into a form that would enthrall Fantul. When he had him under his influence, his plan would have begun.

"He thinks he's so fascinating." Fantul waved his fork at Sulrad as he glanced around at the students seated beside him. The students that did whatever he told them to, the students that had tortured Sulrad since the day he first arrived in this cesspool of a school.

"Listen to me. You love this sausage, you adore the root vegetables, the gravy is your favorite and you love to listen to the sound of my voice." Sulrad kept his voice even in tone and constant in pace as he reinforced the imaginary figure that would guide the spell.

"Listen to the sound of my voice, listen to it rise and fall. The words mean nothing; just listen to the sound of my voice," Sulrad intoned.

Fantul opened his mouth and closed it again. His gaze riveted on Sulrad.

"Yes, you find it so compelling, the sound of my voice. You could listen to it all day. Listen to the sound of my voice. The words are meaningless. The sound is everything. Listen

to my voice. Listen. Listen.” Sulrad droned on, having caught the attention of his victim. He almost let excitement show in his voice, but that would have ruined the incantation. Soon, Fantul would be ready. If the scroll spoke truth, Fantul wouldn’t even remember that this had happened.

“When you wake, you will remember nothing of this conversation, but you will follow my instructions exactly as I have set them forth.”

“Here, you have it. I’ve lost my appetite.” Sulrad raised his voice and shoved the plate at Fantul.

Fantul blinked and focused his gaze on Sulrad’s plate.

“I wouldn’t touch a plate that’s been nibbled on by a rat,” he said.

The students seated around Fantul laughed.

“I’ll take it then.” Kelnor reached for the plate. His own was already empty.



That evening, Kelnor appeared at Sulrad’s door.

“Town?” he asked.

“Again?”

“You have the coin. I don’t see why you’re so tight with it. What else can you spend it on?”

“You know I don’t like the food,” Sulrad protested, but he had already made up his mind. If his mesmeric arts had worked, and he had every reason to think they would, his session with Fantul would bear fruit tonight. He would not miss that for the world. He carefully replaced the scroll he had been reading back into the drawer and made a great show of dressing for a night out. He listened to Kelnor prattle on about the new minstrel at the inn and how the cook had added a new recipe, but all Sulrad wanted was a front-row seat to Fantul’s downfall. When they reached the

Merry Blacksmith Inn, Sulrad and Kelnor took a seat with their backs to the door.

As they settled in, Kelnor glanced around the room. Catching sight of the three seated near the hearth, he turned to Sulrad. "Maybe we should find another place to eat."

"I'm not afraid of him." Sulrad reached out and tugged the robe of the rotund Kelnor as he struggled to stand. Sulrad had chosen this particular inn because he knew it was the one Fantul frequented.

"No?" Kelnor reached up and traced his finger along his neck.

Sulrad tugged on the sky iron ring that circled his neck. He didn't need magic for what was about to happen if the texts were correct. When the server brought the ale to Fantul, it would trigger the suggestion that Sulrad had instilled in him earlier, release the idea that Sulrad had implanted in Fantul that he was invincible. If he was correct, that was all it would take to set him on the path to his own destruction.

"What you boys having?" The server was a young man, not much older than Sulrad himself. The lad was thin and wiry with his hair tied back in a short queue.

"I'll have what they're having." Sulrad nodded toward Fantul and company.

"Kidney pie and red wine?" The boy turned his gaze to Kelnor. "For both of you?"

"Suits me fine," Kelnor replied.

"Wine? Not Ale?" Sulrad panicked. Without ale, the carefully crafted compulsion he had created for Fantul would not be triggered.

"Wine. Red. A rather poor vintage, if you ask me, the cheapest we offer. You could do a lot better for just a few more coppers a mug." The server raised an eyebrow as if hoping Sulrad would opt for the more expensive wine leading to a larger tip.

"Sorry. No wine for me," Sulrad said. "Gives me a headache. How about watered ale? I need to keep my wits about me."

"Watered ale it is." The server turned to Kelnor. "You?"

"I'll have the better wine. I don't have that sensitivity to spirits my friend here has."

"Right away, sire."

The server disappeared only to reappear moments later with a tray laden with a pair of lightly browned kidney pies.

The crust was flaky, breaking apart under the gentle probing of Sulrad's knife. He steeled himself to eat meat he had not killed himself, but when the gravy spilled out of the crust exposing the bits of kidney and vegetables, he was hard pressed not to retch and spoil the meal. He spread the meat around the plate and picked at the vegetables and crust, taking just the smallest bites he could manage.

"I thought you were hungry," Kelnor said.

"Thirsty, not hungry."

"That's why you asked them to water down your ale?"

"I'm thirsty, not in the mood for inebriation."

"I'm always in the mood for inebriation." Kelnor raised his mug of wine and drew a heavy draught.

The way Kelnor was going, he'd be a bit fuzzy in the morning when he attempted to recall what had happened. That fuzziness was precisely what Sulrad had in mind. He needed Kelnor to recall that he was present, and that Sulrad had taken no direct action against Fantul. He only wished Fantul had been more predictable. How was Sulrad to know the boy drank wine and not ale? Such a simple thing like that could ruin his plans. How could he have been so careless? In the future, he would pay more attention to the small things that seemed not to matter.

"Ready for another?" The server paused on his way to the kitchen. He balanced a tray full of partially eaten fare on his hand. The aroma of roast meat coming from the tray made Sulrad queasy. What he wanted was for the boy to

move on, but without ale, Fantul's evening would be most boring.

"How about a round of ale for my friends over there?" Sulrad nodded his head toward Fantul and his disciples. "For all of them."

"Silver and a half," the boy said.

"Fine." Sulrad reached into his pocket and retrieved the coins. He hated to part with them, but then again, they had been weighing on his conscience. Ran hated those who accumulated wealth. As he handed the silver and five coppers to the boy, he felt a lightening on his shoulders as if some burden had been lifted from him. He smiled at the lad and added a copper, not because the lad deserved it, but because Sulrad was convinced that Ran was pleased with such a sacrifice and shedding of wealth.

The boy took the coins and rushed off with the tray, returning in moments with a fistful of mugs which he placed on the table before Fantul and his disciples.

Fantul glanced around the inn, his gaze briefly landing on Sulrad.

Sulrad smiled and nodded. He hoped Fantul would think him such a spineless coward that he would attempt to bribe his tormentor. It didn't really matter what Fantul thought. So long as he took a sip of the ale.

Sulrad held his breath. Any moment now.

Fantul nudged the mug of ale away from him and lifted his own mug of wine. He took a deep draught and set it on the table before digging into kidney pie on the plate before him.

"Ran, curse me for a fool," Sulrad muttered.

"You're what?" Kelnor asked. His words were already slurred as he had finished his first mug of wine and was well into his second.

"Nothing," Sulrad replied. "I didn't say anything."

As if in response to his lie, the statue that hung around his neck gave a small twitch, reminding him that Ran hated

liars almost as much as he hated gluttony.

"Here she is." Kelnor spat crumbs from the crust of his kidney pie as he spoke.

"Here who is?"

"Quadra. The minstrel I've been telling you about. She's amazing. You will never again hear such a fine voice, and her skill with the lute is beyond compare."

As Kelnor filled him in on the favorable attributes of the young woman, Sulrad made a mental comparison to what he saw. The girl was easy to look at, but no raving beauty. She was a bit on the bony side, something he found attractive, as it told him she was no slave to food and not weighed down with the sin of gluttony. Kelnor described her hair as golden flax, but it was more like the color of straw, and if truth be told, approaching its consistency as well. What Kelnor had not been mistaken about was her facility with the lute.

She settled herself into the corner of the room and strummed the instrument.

A pure, clear chord filled the common room, causing a hush to fall over the patrons.

She plucked at the strings, drawing forth a haunting melody that Sulrad had heard before but could not recall the words to.

He had almost lost himself in the minstrel's song when a commotion broke out near the hearth. Fantul was standing, arm outstretched toward the minstrel. His lips were forming the words to the spell that Sulrad had encouraged him to employ. It was a compulsion spell whose effects were not unlike the mesmeric trance he had placed on Fantul. Fantul must have taken a swig of his ale when the minstrel began her song. Vengeance was about to be realized. The boy would be expelled from school or at the very least spend the next summer in a sky iron collar.

His work here was done.

"Come on, Kelnor. I'm tired. It's time to get back."

"I'm not leaving. Not now."

"Suit yourself. I'm tired. I'm for bed."

Sulrad rose from his seat and rushed for the door, pausing only long enough to see the inn's staff converging on Fantul where he stood.



The next morning, Sulrad once more found himself standing before the assembled masters of Amedon. This was not what he had planned when he set out to repay Fantul for his unkindness. How had his plan gone so wrong?

"Do you know why we called you here today?" Alwroth asked.

"I have not been told, but I suppose it has to do with the unfortunate events surrounding the death of my classmate."

"Indeed, it does. We have heard that the two of you are not so close that you think of him as a fellow of any sort." Alwroth gestured to the open seat. "Please sit."

Sulrad took the offered seat but perched on the edge of the chair, hands folded in his lap.

"Now. What have you heard about the death of Fantul?"

"Only rumors, Your Mightiness."

"Tell me what rumors you've heard."

"It is said that Fantul ran into trouble in town. That he used magic against one of the townsfolk. That he turned his magic against the guards who attempted to stop him, and that they were unable to restrain him. A fight broke out and Fantul ended up dead."

"So they say. Do you know that until this incident not one student has brought forth a complaint against Fantul?"

"I would not know if anyone did," Sulrad said.

"None did save one. That was Kelnor, who brought a complaint on your behalf."

That was unexpected. Kelnor was as close a friend as Sulrad had, but he had no idea the boy had even noticed that Fantul took every opportunity to torture Sulrad. Was this what a true friend was like? He had never had a true friend. He'd never needed nor wanted one. Was Kelnor someone he could rely on? Or would the boy eventually let him down like everyone else in his life? He would have to give the matter more thought, but for now, he couldn't afford to be distracted. "He did?" Sulrad asked.

"He did," Alwroth said. "He mentioned it to me not more than three days past. Told me that Fantul was out to make your life miserable and asked if there was something we could do to stop him."

"I was not aware of this," Sulrad said.

"You did not encourage him to come to us?"

"Your Mightiness. If I had wished you to intervene, I would have come to you myself. I had no idea Kelnor had come to see you."

Alwroth stared at him.

Sweat broke out on Sulrad's forehead. Would Alwroth know that he was guilty? Not of lying. He had not lied. He truly did not know that Kelnor had interceded on his behalf.

"It seems that you speak truth." Alwroth sat back and folded his hands.

"Tell me. What did Fantul do to you?"

"He made a jest of my name, called me sewer rat, and he would hit me when he thought no one was looking, usually by reaching through a crowd of students to rap me on the head. Not as bad as my father used to. It was a bother, but that was all. I would never wish ill on anyone."

"Yet the circumstances are very strange. A boy who has shown exemplary restraint suddenly decides to use magic on our fine townsfolk without regard to the consequences. It almost seems as if he had been encouraged to misbehave. As if he were acting under a compulsion spell."

Sulrad swallowed. Was there a way the senior wizards could detect the mesmeric arts he had employed? It was not magic. Unless someone recognized what he had done. There was no trace of magic to implicate him.

Sulrad ran his finger across the shining iron of his collar. "I would not know about any such thing."

"Yes, you wear a collar. And there was no magic present. No one placed a compulsion on Fantul." Alwroth gestured to Sulrad's collar. "Even if there had been magic present, I can see it could not have been your doing."

"No, Your Mightiness," Sulrad agreed.

"You may go," Alwroth said.

"Thank you, Your Mightiness." Sulrad stood and bowed. He slid the chair back beneath the table and backed out of the room.

As the council doors swung shut behind him, Sulrad heard a familiar voice.

Kelnor had been waiting for him all the while. "What did they want?" he asked.

"They wanted to know if I had a grudge against Fantul. Wanted to know if I had anything to do with his death."

"Don't they have eyes?" Kelnor gestured toward his own neck, mimicking the collar that lay heavily on Sulrad's neck.

"They said there was no trace of magic on Fantul. That he acted on his own."

"I knew he was a bit of a hot-head, but to ash an innocent and then take on a guard. Who would have thought he was capable of such a thing?"

"His family is powerful," Sulrad explained. "He was used to being respected and treated like royalty. Maybe he couldn't take being just another wizard."

"He's been here long enough to know that when your powers awaken, your past vanishes. None of us can inherit, none of us can take on the mantle of a ruler."

Sulrad shrugged. "Perhaps he thought otherwise."

"How about you? Are you glad to see him gone?"

Sulrad shuddered. His plan had gone horribly awry. When he carefully plotted it out, he imagined the boy using magic on the minstrel to try to get her to fall for him. Using magic off school grounds was forbidden, but often overlooked. Using magic on townsfolk was more serious. That should have resulted in Fantul being placed in a collar himself, and that should have ended the constant disparagement he leveled at Sulrad. His death was not intended. Just as Sulrad's father had been unintended or the two robbers on the road. He would have to be more careful in the future. He didn't need any more deaths on his hands.

"Certainly not," Sulrad said. "I bear no one any ill. If it looks like I do, it's because they have earned my ire each and every day. Fantul was like that, constantly raising my ire. But had he only ceased his torture, I am certain we would have become fast friends."

"Because you make friends so easily?"

"Speaking of friends, the council told me that you interceded on my behalf and asked them to do something about Fantul."

"You found out?"

"I did, and that's the reason they had me in there in the first place. You did me a disservice by bringing up a personal matter to the ruling body of Amedon. Do you think so little of me that you have to fight my battles on my behalf? Am I so weak in your eyes that you need to stand up for me?"

"I was only trying to help," Kelnor said.

"That's the sort of help I truly don't need," Sulrad snapped.

"It's not that I don't respect you," Kelnor said. "It's just, you know. The collar." Kelnor pointed to his own neck once again.

"This!" Sulrad tapped the sky iron collar lying about his neck. "You constantly remind me that it's there and you

have steadfastly refused to assist me in removing it. Is that the sort of friend you think I need?"

"You don't want my help?" Kelnor asked.

"No, I don't. I can take care of myself." Sulrad turned and strode off down the first hallway he came to. He had no idea where it led, but anywhere away from Kelnor was just fine with him.

MURDERER

GARLATH

Garlath sat in the chair across from the senior wizard. Alwroth always looked uncomfortable meeting in his study. Perhaps he felt less official outside of the council chambers. Perhaps it was Garlath's lack of deference that put the man ill at ease. Garlath could have been a bit more respectful, but that wasn't his way. He secretly enjoyed putting the senior wizard off balance from time to time.

"The boy is involved. I know it," Alwroth said. "There was no magic used, and Sulrad wears the collar. Even so, he must have found a way to compel Fantul to act. Why else would a solid student do such a thing?"

"I have no idea. I'll get to the truth of this, and when I do, we may have to take more drastic action," Garlath said. "I fear simply collaring the boy isn't going to be enough. He has power to spare, even in that collar. Imagine what he would be like fully trained and unrestrained."

"I have. It keeps me up at night. This boy, Sulrad, he could be a mighty one, or he could be the death of us all. There is great danger with this one."

Garlath rose and grasped the back of the chair he had just vacated. "Give me the day. Let me see what I can discern. Then we can decide."

“Fine,” Alwroth replied. “But only the day. If you can’t ferret out the truth in a day, you’re never going to.”

“I’ll get to the bottom of this one way or another.”

“See that you do. We don’t need another Radkinald on our hands.”

Garlath suppressed a shudder, glancing up at the scar on the thick stone walls of the senior’s study. Radkinald had been a promising student who had turned against Amedon and set himself up as an emperor. By the time he had been stopped, almost half the population of Amedon had lost their lives. Garlath himself had been only a boy, just arrived when the war broke out, but he recalled it well. In a way, Radkinald was responsible for Garlath’s rise to a position of influence at such a young age. It was only the sparseness of competition that had allowed Garlath to rise as quickly as he did.

After a brief stop at his own study, Garlath headed to town. He was familiar with the Merry Blacksmith Inn. It was the sort of place the younger students frequented when they were allowed. The fare was generous, the cost minimal, and they had a tolerance for wizards that many places did not. The owner’s son was a wizard of some standing in the council and the owner encouraged the boys from Amedon to visit, not that he permitted any foolishness. He had his own guards who knew how to handle young wizards that stepped out of line.

Garlath wondered what had happened that could have resulted in the death of the boy. He knew the basics. Fantul had ashed a minstrel, then turned his powers on the guard. The guard carried a protective amulet, but being unable to restrain the boy, had resorted to violence. In the struggle, the boy had been killed. It sounded straightforward, except why had Fantul decided to ash the minstrel? What could have caused him to lash out like that?

“May I help you, sire?” The serving boy was dressed in black and had ashes on his head. “We’re in mourning, so

the fare is limited, mostly gruel and stew, but it won't leave you hungry."

"I'm not here to eat. I want to know what happened last night."

"You're here about Orisia? A wizard like you?"

"I'm here about the boy, Fantul," Garlath explained.

The serving boy spat on the floor. "The monster that killed Orisia. Not that you care about her."

"I care about her. That's why I'm trying to find the person responsible for her death."

"That wizard. The one the guards killed. I won't say his name. He doesn't deserve to be remembered. He killed her. Tried to bewitch her with his wizard's magic. When she wasn't having any, he tried to force her. She fought back. He turned her to ash. Right in front of everyone."

"That story I've heard. Fantul—"

"Please don't use his name," the boy interrupted.

"Fine. The young wizard," Garlath paused, studying the boy's face.

The boy nodded. "The young wizard. He did it. What's so hard to believe about that?"

"The young wizard had never shown any inclination toward something like this. He was a model student. Never broke the rules."

The boy shrugged. "I saw it."

"Tell me what you saw. Don't leave anything out."

"It was a busy night. Orisia draws a crowd." The boy paused. "She did draw a crowd. Filled the place to overflowing when she sang, she did. I was serving these two young men. Wizards, by the look of them. They ordered for themselves and the three of them over here." He nodded to a table closer to where the minstrel would have stood.

"I'd just dropped off their ales and returned to work when it started. The young wizard. He stood up and stretched out his hand, saying these strange words. I never heard the likes of them. Is that some wizard language?"

"Most likely," Garlath said. "Go on. He cast a spell on her?"

"He tried, but it didn't work. She glanced at him, then just kept on singing. As the song went on, the young wizard repeated the spell. Each time, Orisia frowned at him but kept singing. I guess whatever he was doing wasn't working on her. She must have worn a charm much like the one the guards wear. Something that protected her from his magic.

"Well, after Orisia finished singing, the young wizard waltzed over to her and started to get all handsy. He was touching her hair and her shoulder and talking all smooth like he could persuade her to go home with him just by being polite, but she was having none of it. She off and slapped him. Hard. Right across the face. Left a handprint on the young wizard." The boy placed his hand over his face.

"The young wizard screamed at her. Said that no charm could protect her from fire. He stepped back and created a fireball in his hand. Huge, angry red thing. All glowing and spitting sparks like to set the inn on fire. He lofted it at her. I saw that part. It just floated slowly across the space between them, and when it touched her, she vanished. No scream of pain, no cry for help. One moment she was there, the next, nothing but a cloud of ash settling to the floor."

"You said the young wizard was not alone. What about his companions? Did they do anything to stop him?"

The boy snorted. "They ran, like scared cockroaches before the torch. As soon as the young wizard started using magic, they high-tailed it out of here like they were on fire."

"How long before the guards arrived?"

"Right away. They probably brushed past those two on their way in. First was Drass. He's the bigger one. He rushed over to the young wizard and grabbed him. The wizard screamed at him that he would ash the guard too, but that didn't stop Drass. He shoved the wizard to the ground and put his foot on him to hold him still until Ryel

could get a rope around his neck. They were going to take him outside and pretend like they was going to string him up. They do that sort of thing to scare a lad into better behavior before taking him to the gaol."

"It sounds like the guards had it under control. How then did the boy end up dead?"

"As Ryel was putting the rope around his neck. The boy started kicking. Probably realized he'd made a mistake. Started screaming that he hadn't done nothing. It wasn't him who ashed Orisia, but some other boy."

"Did he say who?"

"Sultan?" the boy offered. "Something like that. Said this Sultan had used magic on him. Made him do it. He kept jabbing his chin at that table over there, where the two who bought the ale sat. At first I thought he meant they had used a potion on them and I felt guilty, because I brought him the ale, but those two never touched the ale. It wasn't tainted or drugged. I would have known."

"I thought you said the guards had subdued him."

"They had, but he twisted and got away from them. Drass, he grabbed the young wizard by the arms, pinned them behind his back, but that didn't stop him from casting a spell. The wizard started speaking that strange tongue again, and the room filled with green fog. Everyone rushed outside like fowl fleeing from a fox. I was at the back of the room when I heard it. It was awful. Made my stomach turn inside out."

"Heard what?" Garlath asked.

"The snap. When the young wizard started chanting his spell, Ryel grabbed his head and twisted. Damnedest thing I ever saw. One moment the young wizard was chanting spells, and the room was filled with green fog. There was a sickening crunching noise, and that was it. The wizard went limp. The fog vanished, and the room cleared, except now there was a new odor. The wizard shat himself when Ryel snapped his neck."

"And afterwards?"

"Drass and Ryel took him out. I don't know where they took him, but I had to clean up the mess. We closed early. No one wanted to finish their meal after something like that. We had to refund the patrons for every copper they paid, even though some of them were near finished eating. I'm not sure how we are going to weather this. Hard enough to get by as it is."

"Don't worry about that," Garlath said. "The wizards of Amedon will make the owner whole. He won't suffer."

"And me? I usually get a silver in tips," the boy said.

"How about four coppers?" Garlath reached into his pocket and withdrew the four shiny coppers, extending them to the boy.

"Five would be more like it."

"And I'm certain you received something before the fracas started. I could make it three, or two, or even one if you want to argue with me."

"No, sire, Four will do."

Garlath fished another coin from his pocket and handed it to the boy.

"A silver? What for?"

"To keep your mouth shut about this. We don't need any rumors getting started. Our boys are not as welcome in town as we'd like. Rumors like this will only make matters worse." Garlath raised an eyebrow at the boy. "You understand? I will know if you break your word."

"I understand and you can count on me."

With that, Garlath departed.

What a mess.

He was certain Sulrad had been involved somehow, but how?

That boy was bright, too bright. What had he discovered?

It looked like Garlath was going to have to spend some time in the library, one of his least favorite places. Not that

there was anything wrong with the place. It was just the dust bothered him, and the very idea of concentrating and restricting knowledge made his blood run cold. If he were in charge, anyone would be allowed to use the library, wizards and non-wizards alike. He smiled at that thought.

It was just one more reason the council found Garlath uncomfortable.

He liked it that way.

INTERROGATION

SULRAD

The rap on Sulrad's door startled him. No one but Kelnor ever knocked at his door, and this certainly wasn't Kelnor. The knock had been light, but not timid. Who could it be? He had already been questioned about Fantul. Did they suspect? Were they even now coming to take him away, to spend his days in a prison cell or even executed?

"Who's there?" He pulled on his socks and donned his robe. When he was in his room alone, he preferred to shed the extra layers of clothing and work at his studies in just his small clothes. It left him cold on most days, but the cold was a small price to pay to avoid the sin of excess that came from wearing more layers of clothes than he required.

"The wizard Garlath wishes to speak with you," came the voice. It was a woman, young by the sound, but he had no way of knowing for sure. Most students could use magic to see who was at their door, but not him. While he had managed to get a few spells through the collar, it still prevented him from employing even this simple spell.

"Just a moment." Sulrad snugged his belt tight and opened the door.

The woman who stood there was short and well-crafted. Her long red hair flowed over her shoulders in curls that

emphasized the sparkling blue of her eyes. She was dressed in fine garments, not robes. Not a wizard, then.

"Egrid?" Sulrad ventured a guess. Egrid was famous amongst the students. Wizard Garlath's assistant, the boys said, was a sight that made a trip to the wizard's study worth whatever discipline had earned the summons. From what he'd heard, she rarely entered the student's living quarters, and never the classrooms. Why then was she here?

"Wizard Garlath has asked to see you. He wishes it to be discreet. Can you conceal us as we make our way to his study?"

Sulrad tugged at the collar around his neck. "I cannot."

"Oh, my apologies."

Her face held neither a hint of sarcasm nor of pity. She was truly sorry.

"I'm so used to it that I often forget it's there myself," he lied.

"Let's take the round-about way. Then if anyone sees us, they will think we are having an assignation." She reached out and took his hand, her fingers small and warm in his.

He broke out in a sweat.

"Don't worry. I don't bite. No matter what anyone told you."

Sulrad skipped a step to match her pace. She was half a head shorter than him, which spoke to the length of time he'd been in Amedon. Had that much time passed or was he growing swiftly?

"So, tell me where you come from? I rarely get to talk with you boys. You're always so busy, racing in and out of the wizard's office."

"Not much to tell really," he said. "I grew up in Frostan. We were serfs on Baron Reik's land. I worked the fields when I could, carved spoons and the like when there was no work."

"Your father?" she asked. "Was he a field hand, then?"

Sulrad swallowed. How much to tell? Did she already know?

"He was a carver. Made his coin carving statues and figures and selling them in the market. When the market was slow, he would work the fields with me."

"And your mother?"

"She was a fine woman," he said. "Took good care of me and my father, right until she left."

"She left?" Egrid's clenched his hand as if she had personal experience with such a matter. Did she have a shameful secret as well? Was he not the only one who had been abandoned? Surely not. She possessed no magic. She would not have been expelled from her own family as he had, but what was her secret? He wanted to ask her about it, but he was too shy. Best to stick to his own story.

"When the magic came alive in me, she left. Said it was a curse and she couldn't abide living in the same house with me."

"That must have been terrible." Egrid squeezed his finger. "Being a wizard isn't a sin. It's just something that happens. Not your choice, was it?"

"No. I had no say in it."

"There you have it. No reason to treat you that way for something you couldn't help."

Sulrad paused at that thought. He had been treated unfairly for something he had no control over. It should have made things better, but it only made him more angry. Would his own mother disown him because his eye color was different, or his hair? How then was she justified in shunning him for magic when he had no choice in the matter?

Egrid's touch pulled him back to the present. "How old were you then?"

"Just shy of thirteen summers."

"Then you came here?"

"No. Not right away."

"How long have you been here, then? I thought you've been here almost two summers."

"I have, but back then, I had no idea what to do about the magic, and to be honest, it was not very strong. I could light a candle if I concentrated long enough, but nothing like the real wizards can."

"Real wizards?"

"Like the more senior students and the full wizards. They have so much magic, it makes me a bit fearful at times."

"What's there to fear? Wizards are bound by strict rules. They don't use magic on one another. It's just not done."

Sulrad's hand trembled. He wanted to pull away, but wouldn't that only demonstrate his guilt? He rushed to cover his nervousness. "I guess I just worry. I was treated poorly by another student. I'm certain you heard all about it."

"I did. It's too bad what happened to him. Whenever we lose a student, it hurts. Especially when it could have been avoided."

Egrid had taken them on a round-about path that ended at Garlath's door. She rapped once and opened it without waiting for an answer.

Garlath sat behind his desk, a sheaf of parchment sitting before him.

"Sit, Sulrad." He gestured to the empty chair across from him and then turned to Egrid.

"How did he do?"

"It's as you feared." Egrid said.

"Thank you. You may go."

"As you wish." Egrid nodded her head and backed out, closing the door behind her.

"Sulrad. We have a problem."

"Sire?"

"Do you know what a truth tell is?" Garlath asked.

"Truth tell?"

"It's a special skill. Not found in wizards, by the way."

Sulrad's innards twisted in a knot. He frantically reviewed what he had spoken of on the walk over. Had he lied? Had he said anything that would incriminate him? Egrid had been so sympathetic, so friendly, disarming, it was hard to recall what he might have let slip.

"Care to explain to me what happened to Fantul, and don't skip over the interesting parts. I know you did something, and it's evident that you didn't use magic."

"I didn't *do* anything to him."

"Of that I don't doubt, but what did you *say* to him?"

"Say?"

"Say," Garlath repeated. "I've been doing a bit of studying on my own. You realize that each book and scroll in the library is specially spelled. With the proper incantation, it's relatively simple to discern which ones any given student has read. It seems that you've been reading a lot of very interesting scrolls."

"I don't understand," Sulrad said.

"I think you do. I think you understand very well. I think you understand what I am talking about, but you think you can outsmart me."

"I ... I wear a collar. What could I do even if I wanted to?"

"That's what threw me for the longest time. It took me a bit to decipher the old text. I'll have to admit, you have a facility with the old languages that no one, not even Kelnor, can match." Garlath shrugged. "It was probably my mistake to ask him to familiarize you with the ancient wizards' script. Most boys get one look at that and run for the hills. I figured you'd do much the same, but I was wrong. You learned it almost overnight, and then you dug — dug until you found a very arcane branch of study."

Garlath paused as if in thought, then continued almost as if he were speaking only to himself. "Who would have thought a title like 'The Mesmeric Arts' hid anything dangerous?"

Sulrad's heart stopped. Garlath had uncovered his secret.

"I see. I have discerned what you did."

Sulrad braced himself. Was Garlath going to use his magic to incinerate him right here? Was that the cost of his crimes?

"You can relax. I'm not going to ash you." Garlath sat back. "Picture this. I'm standing before the council and explaining to them that you whispered in Fantul's ear and he suddenly decided to head to town, ash a minstrel, and fight with guards." Garlath shook his head. "I'm not sure they would believe it, even if I showed them this."

Garlath pulled out the scroll Sulrad had found that explained how the mesmeric arts worked. "It's all a bit boring and repetitive, don't you think?"

Was he expected to say something? His breath escaped his lungs before he could stop himself. Was this a reprieve?

"I have a dilemma." Garlath folded his hands and placed them on the scroll. "I can't let you run around Amedon where you might get into even more trouble than this. And I can't release you into the wild the way you are." Garlath looked directly at Sulrad. "So what am I to do with you?"

Sulrad shrugged.

"I wish I knew. But I think that there is still hope yet. I've decided, and the council agrees. You are to be returned to your home to take up the quest you should have been on when I first found you. Had I assessed your powers correctly, I might have placed the collar on you before I sent you on to Amedon the first time. I should have, and that's my mistake. It's why I have chosen this route for you. Tomorrow morning, you will be sent home. From there, I want you to make your way back here. Pay particular attention to the people you meet along the way. Imagine what makes them do what they do."

"I don't understand," Sulrad said. "I'm going to be sent home?"

“You are. Just for now. I expect to see you back here in half a season with a new attitude and a better appreciation for this place.”

Sulrad tugged at the collar. “And this?”

Garlath laughed. “You remain in the collar. It will dampen your magic just as if it had only now come awake in you. That’s the state most boys are in when they travel here. That’s something you should have experienced, and I took it from you, so I am returning it.” Garlath stood. “Tomorrow. Sunup. Wizard’s Keep.”

Sulrad stood but remained silent. He had so many questions, he didn’t know where to start.

“Tomorrow?” Garlath raised an eyebrow at him.

The door opened, and Egrid stood there. She reached out her hand to Sulrad and said. “Walk with me?”

He extended his hand but pulled it back, recalling what Garlath had said about the truth tell.

“No thanks. I know the way.”

DISGRACE

SULRAD

If they were going to expel him from Amedon even for a while, Sulrad needed to be prepared. There were other scrolls in the library he wanted, and he'd already enthralled the librarian with his mesmeric arts over the last several days, so the librarian would simply look the other way as he walked out with them. He hadn't expected to need that spell, but having a plan in place in the event that things went wrong was something that he had learned prudent.

"Surely they don't mean it," Kelnor said. "Wizard Garlath is just trying to frighten you into obedience. No one has ever been sent away. It's not done."

"Well, it's being done to me." Sulrad hastened his pace, hoping to exhaust the out-of-shape Kelnor before they reached the library, but the rotund student had more wind than he expected. "I need to brush up on a few spells before they send me out into the world to learn some respect," Sulrad snarled. "I'm not leaving unprepared. I won't have this collar on forever."

"You worry too much."

"You worry too little." Sulrad paused at the doorway to the room where they spent most of their time with the more arcane and ancient scrolls. A new guard had been installed.

He had a look about him that told Sulrad he was well aware of the reputation of the student that stood before him.

"Sulrad and Kelnor, here to perform research for the wizard Garlath," Sulrad lied.

The guard looked at him as if he had not spoken.

"Sulrad and Kelnor," he repeated. "Garlath sent us."

The blank look on the guard's face was disconcerting.

"Can you understand me?" Sulrad asked.

The guard remained impassive.

"Garlath? You know him?"

Still nothing.

Sulrad shouted at the guard. "Can you understand me?"

"I don't think he can *hear* you," Kelnor said.

"That right? You can't hear?" Sulrad demanded.

A slight smile crossed the guard's lips.

"But you can read my lips," Sulrad said.

The guard nodded and his lips curled into a full smile.

"We need to get inside." Sulrad spoke slowly and loudly.

The guard shook his head.

"Garlath sent us. Do you know Garlath?"

The guard nodded.

"So you're going to let us in?"

The guard shook his head.

"Why not?"

"No one allowed." The guard spoke with great difficulty. It took every bit of concentration for Sulrad to understand his words.

"No one?"

"No one," the guard repeated.

"Why not?"

The guard shook his head, the smile fading from his lips.

Kelnor tugged at Sulrad's sleeve. "Come on. He's not going to let us in."

"I'll remember you," Sulrad spat.

The guard stepped into the doorway, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Come on." Kelnor was already half a dozen footsteps ahead of Sulrad.

"Where are we going?" Sulrad asked.

"If it's your last day," Kelnor said. "We're going to town and having an ale, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

"I hate this place," Sulrad said.

"Then you won't be sorry to leave it, will you?"



Morning came earlier than it should have. The room spun and dipped even as Sulrad attempted to right himself. He fell back on his bed. His guts were wrenching, threatening to empty themselves all over his room if he had not already emptied them into the chamber pot repeatedly throughout the night. The slight sounds that he was accustomed to had been miraculously amplified. The screeching of a cricket in the cabinet where he kept his robes was deafening. Laughter from the halls was painfully loud, and the roaring thud of boots on tile was almost too much.

"It's time." A rap on the door sounded like a battering ram attempting to storm the gates of his castle.

"I'm dying."

"No, you're not, but you do need to get up."

"Let me die," Sulrad moaned. How could he have let Kelnor talk him into drinking all that ale, and why had he eaten so much of the inn fare when he clearly didn't enjoy it?

"I'm coming in." The door opened, and in walked Kelnor. His hair was freshly washed and combed. His robes were immaculate, and even his boots had been shined. How was that possible? Kelnor had been right there with Sulrad, eating and drinking at the inn until they were thrown out for singing louder than the minstrels.

"Let me die," Sulrad said.

"You've been summoned. You must appear."

"Let them go on without me." Sulrad was in no mood to put up with the wizards' rules today. Let them wait for him. If he was to be punished, he'd do it on his own terms.

"I was sent to get you," Kelnor said.

"You being punished?"

"In a manner of speaking. Garlath heard we painted the town last night and told me it was my responsibility to make sure you were on time this morning."

"Drag me there, then." Sulrad held out his arms.

"No. You're going under your own power." Kelnor glanced around the room. "Where are your robes?"

"Burned them," Sulrad said.

"You *cannot* go out dressed like that." Kelnor stuck his head out the door and stopped a passing student. They had a brief conversation and Kelnor returned. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Kelnor took Sulrad's arm and draped it over his shoulder. "Need to use the pot?" he asked.

"Already done that."

"Good. They'll have a fresh robe waiting for you in the washroom. Let's get going."

"Let me die."

"After we wash you."

Kelnor dragged Sulrad down the corridor to the washroom, the tiles cold on his feet the whole way. Mercifully, the washroom was empty. Most students either washed at night or had risen earlier than Sulrad and were already dressed. He had the place to himself.

Kelnor tugged at Sulrad's shirt. "Now."

"No." Sulrad clamped his arms around his chest. "I don't need help. Get out. I can do this alone."

"You going to wash yourself if I leave you alone?" Kelnor asked.

"Yes. Leave."

Kelnor stepped back and raised his hands. "Water's already warm. I used my magic to heat it up for you. Call if you need anything."

"Please leave," Sulrad said.

"Already gone."

Sulrad peeled off his small clothes and stepped into the stall. A bucket of water had been positioned above the stall. Ready for him. He reached up and tipped it enough to splash water over his body, then felt around for the soap. Soap was something he had grown used to in Amedon. His father would have said it was a luxury and a sin, but Sulrad had grown accustomed to being clean. He preferred it to any other state.

As the water splashed again, rinsing the soap away, a voice intruded.

"What happened to your back?" It was Kelnor.

"I fell," Sulrad lied. No one had seen the stripes on his back. He kept them hidden. What would Kelnor think of him when he knew that Sulrad had been regularly and savagely beaten? Would he think him weak? Pathetic? He tried to turn and hide his shame.

"You fell. Repeatedly across your back and thighs? Looks more like someone took a switch to you. Someone who had no restraint."

"I fell."

"Who was it? Your father?"

"He was strict," Sulrad said.

"I'm sorry."

"Why? Did you have something to do with it?"

"No. I'm just sorry you had to endure that."

"It's over. In the past. I don't need any pity."

"I'm not offering you pity," Kelnor said. "I did bring you fresh clothes, though."

"Set them over there." Sulrad motioned to the bench formed of tile that was part of the washroom wall.

"I'll be waiting outside for you," Kelnor said.

"I didn't ask you to do this."

"I'm your friend and that's what friends do."

"I wouldn't do it for you."

"Yes, you would. You just act as if you hate everyone. I know better. You're a genuinely nice person deep down inside. You can't fool me."

"Get out while I dress." Sulrad picked up a towel and threw it at Kelnor. He was sick of looking at the boy's face. He was sick of Amedon. Let them banish him. He'd fare much better on his own. Why had he even come to this place to begin with?



Dry and dressed, Sulrad felt no better. "What if I don't show up?" he asked Kelnor as he exited the washroom.

Kelnor walked close to Sulrad's right side, not touching him but not getting more than a hand's breadth away from him either. "They'll come and get you."

Was Kelnor his guard? Was Kelnor in on this? It was hard to imagine the rotund student as a stooge for the wizards.

As they entered the courtyard before the great library, Sulrad winced. It looked as if the entire student body was there waiting for him.

"It won't be that bad, trust me." Kelnor escorted Sulrad up to the front of the assembled students and came to a stop facing the wizard Garlath.

Garlath was dressed not in his usual robes, but in pure white with crimson bands at his cuffs. His hair was slicked back, and he wore the traditional wizard's hat with its point and stars.

Sulrad grinned at the sight. How was he to take this man seriously when he looked so silly? But Garlath's expression was not silly. He wore a scowl.

Sulrad's heart sank. The wizard usually took things in stride. On this occasion, he was stiff and formal, almost as if he were nervous. It could mean nothing but trouble for Sulrad.

"Sulrad?" Garlath called out so that the entire student body could hear.

"Wizard Garlath." Sulrad tried to keep his voice even in tone and volume, but a slight waver crept in.

"You have been charged with intentionally causing the demise of a fellow student." Garlath addressed the entire student body with his words.

Sulrad drew a breath, but Garlath held up a finger to stop him.

"This will go much easier if you don't argue." His voice was low and pitched only for Sulrad.

"The Wizards' Council has judged you and found you guilty, but we are not vindictive. Your failing is our failing. You were brought here too soon without the opportunity to learn to control your magic as it grew in you. And because this is partly our fault, we have decided to remedy the situation."

He turned to the assembled students. "Any student who causes the demise of another is cast out, but in this case, Sulrad is being given a second chance. He wears the collar. With it in place, he will be as a young boy who has only begun his journey. We are sending him into the world to learn of it for himself. Many of you will be leaving here soon. Should you encounter young Sulrad, I encourage you to assist him in whatever way you might."

Garlath glanced at Sulrad and back to the students. "However, should you come across him anywhere but Amedon and he is not wearing the collar, you are to kill him on sight. No hesitation, no remorse. Do you understand this? Kill him."

"We understand," dozens of students replied in unison.

Sulrad's heart fell. So many enemies. They had all agreed to kill him on sight for simply removing his collar. How could they be so cold? But of course they would kill him. They had never liked him. Never accepted him, and now they all knew that he was a killer.

He surveyed the students, letting his gaze linger on those who had tortured him the most. Let them see that he wasn't afraid. Let them see he was no coward. Let them think he would one day return and they would face his wrath.

"Sulrad!" Garlath turned back to him. "It's time."

Sulrad balled his hands into fists and waited as Garlath created the shimmering portal that led through the void to whatever destination the wizard had chosen for him.

"Step forward," Garlath said. "When you emerge, you are to find your way back here. I'll be waiting."

"I look forward to it." Sulrad stepped into the shimmering silver surface. He'd been through this before. He knew what to expect, but there was something else he wanted to try. As the weight dropped from beneath him, he reached up and grasped the collar that surrounded his neck. He searched inside himself for the foreign magic he had absorbed from the thieves on the road that day, drew it forth, and focused it on the collar. He yanked with all his might, but nothing happened. This collar was nothing like the one he had previously worn. Tiny crystals set into the surface radiated power, maintaining the spell that sealed away his magic even here. He was truly trapped.

He stepped from the silver surface into a wooded area. Several trees were shattered as if by a great impact, and in the ground, a gouge that led to a small crater.

The wizard had sent him home.

HOMELESS

SULRAD

Sulrad spent the day feeling sorry for himself and angry with the wizards in Amedon. He had never asked to go there. They had invited him and now they had rejected him. Just as Toval had. He was once more alone. He had coin and a few belongings. He needed a plan. He just couldn't think of one, and now it was growing dark. The chill of the evening had snuck up on him.

He'd spent the day digging around the crater where the sky iron had come crashing down. With luck, there would be more sky iron buried there, but all he had found was a handful of rough crystals. They looked like colored glass that had been cracked by something hot or struck with a hammer. The sides were irregular and sharp. Some of them were deep red, others light blue, and there was even one that was clear. But that was not the most surprising thing about them. When he examined them, they glowed brilliantly, almost as if they were responding to his magic. When he tried to look inside the crystals, nothing happened, save that he grew quickly tired and had to sit for fear of falling over.

When the sun set, Sulrad started to worry. What had he done? Why had the wizard Garlath pronounced a death sentence on him? Why had he seemed so nervous as he did?

It was as if there were great danger in what he did. Was Sulrad that danger? Garlath had told him he possessed great power. Was that true? Was he truly a threat to the wizards of Amedon? Were they even now searching for him? These thoughts kept him awake throughout the night as he imagined the ways he would strike back at the wizards who had so mistreated him. He had never asked for their help. He had not asked to come to Amedon. He had not asked to be trained, and he had not asked to be tortured incessantly by some prize little hog that thought he was the apple of everyone's eye.

Sulrad shivered, but worse than the cold were the eyes. He felt eyes on him all night long, as if someone were peering from behind the foliage, watching his every move. It was unnerving.

"Cingite me," he cried out, summoning his magic. For a moment he feared, it would not work. So few spells worked when he wore the collar, but this time, something was different. The crystals from the crater seemed to counter the effects of the collar. They were helping him, strengthening what little magic made its way through the collar. He could use that. He imagined the dirt from the crater rising up and forming itself into mud bricks that flew together until they had created a small hut to keep the chill at bay. He didn't really expect anything to happen, but when he uttered the words, the crystals came to life. The dirt surrounding the hole wavered and shook as if a giant hand were stirring the ground. Small drops of blackened earth assembled into a stream of bricks. Perfect rectangles of dark mud quickly turned a deep red, as if they had been fired in a forge. Brick after brick rose from the earth and formed itself, first lining the surrounding ground in a square, but just as quickly layering course upon course until the walls were half a head taller than Sulrad.

When the bricks completed their toil, the woods came alive with rustling that turned to snapping and cracking as

branch after branch tore themselves from the trees upon which they had grown and settled in to cover the brick walls with a tight weave of soft wood. In almost no time, Sulrad had his hut. Not the most elegant, to be sure, but it would keep water out in the rain and stop the night breeze from tugging at him while he slept.

When the hut was complete, the crystals fell dark once more.

The empty feeling in Sulrad's chest was gone, replaced by a pressure, as if he had eaten more than he should. Where had the magic come from? The stones? Could he store magic there?

These questions ran through his mind as he sat back against the brick wall and let out a sigh. He was safe, at least for now.



It was midday when Sulrad woke. His stomach growled, and he had to make water something fierce. He found a convenient tree and relieved himself, then set out in search of food. Root vegetables and a few herbs were all he truly needed. He could have had hare if he had only remembered to set snares, but he had been too busy the night before.

He quickly located a wild tuber and yanked, but it was firmly planted in the ground. He'd have to cut it up, but where was his knife? Could he summon it? Perhaps with the help of the crystals.

He sat on the damp earth and arranged the surrounding crystals.

"Adducere me mihi cult." He spoke the words to summon his knife in the ancient wizards' tongue. But it was more than words. He had learned that lesson well. He visualized the knife, recalled how the blacksmith had hammered it flat while it was hot, and how he had honed the blade to a

mirror finish when it had cooled. He recalled how he had wrapped the leather thong around the tang of the knife to form the hilt, and what the knots he used looked like. Then he imagined it in his hand.

For a heartbeat, he felt fear. The fear of failure, but that was short lived.

A small silver shimmer appeared in the air. It was like the portal that the Garlath had sent him through just the previous night, but it was small, barely larger than his own hand.

He peered into the portal.

There it was.

His knife sat inside a box that rested on the stone surface of a cabinet in a dark and dusty room. How would he get the box open? He glanced around, hoping for inspiration. How to get inside the box?

As if his thoughts were driving the portal, the shimmering silver plunged into the rich red wood of the box. The knife became clear.

He reached for it, felt his fingers wrap around the hilt and close on the rough leather.

It was his.

Afraid that portal would close on his arm, severing his hand, he snatched the knife.

The knife resisted as it passed through the portal but was soon in his hand, firm and weighty just as he recalled it.

The portal snapped shut with a loud pop.

Sulrad jabbed the knife into the ground and loosened the root vegetable. It was round and brown and covered in dirt, but it would make a fine meal. He berated himself. He had prepared for this day by finding and copying scrolls with spells, but he had not even considered finding a pot or a water cup, although those would have been hard to secret on his person. Still, if he only had a pan, he could make a soup out of the root vegetable, but that was a matter for

another time. He had no coin. He could purchase one. He had a few silvers left from his stipend.

He gathered some dry twigs and made a small fire. He sharpened a stick and speared the root vegetable, then jabbed the stick into the ground to hold the brown tuber over the small flame.

Sulrad settled in to watch the vegetable roast as the sky turned from purple to a deep azure. He glanced at the thin thread of smoke rising from his fire. Best to eat and douse the fire so as not to attract attention.

Before he had a chance to smother the fire, a shimmer appeared in the air beside him.

It was a portal.

Were they summoning him back to Amedon?

Could he stop them?

Sulrad drew on the magic of the crystals as he had done earlier. It was growing easier to control it even inside the collar. He directed their magic, using none of his own. He attacked the swirling motes that were coalescing into the now familiar form of the portal that would open onto the void and allow a wizard to travel. If he could somehow stop the magic before the spell was complete, he could stop the portal from forming.

He racked his brains, finally finding the spell he needed. "Magicae best contra end conprehenderent," he shouted.

The magic rose from the crystals, ran along his arm, and intercepted the portal even as it grew more and more solid.

For a moment, the two forces collided.

A shriek as if metal were being torn split the night.

The forming portal exploded in a burst of light that blinded Sulrad.

When his sight recovered, he was alone.

His fire was out.

The crystals were dark.

He was once more sitting alone in a clearing in the woods, beside the fire where his tuber roasted.

He jabbed a finger at it.

It was almost perfectly roasted and completely cold.

ITINERANT

SULRAD

Sulrad rose with the sun and finished off the last of the roasted root vegetable from the night before. He was relieved that no one else had tried to interfere with him during the night, but the woods were not safe. He needed to move on, but where? Rotiaqua had said she was in Frostan. He could go there to seek her out and see why she had become so shy about talking to him via magic. Was it that she was in the castle now? Or was there something else?

But, before he sought her out, he needed coin. He would purchase clothes that fit in better with the populace. The robes he wore in Amedon marked him as a wizard and the clothes he'd taken there no longer fit. He'd need to purchase something more suitable and that meant coin.

If only he could get the collar off.

He tried a variation of the spell he used to create his shelter, drawing on the power of the crystals once more, but nothing happened. Were the crystals depleted? It was once again as if he had no magic whatsoever.

Crystals. There were crystals in the collar. He picked at it, searching for some flaw in the sky iron that would let him release it. Maybe beneath one of the crystals.

He picked at a small crystal, but it was fastened firm.

He placed the tip of his sky iron knife against one of the stones and pressed.

He slipped and cut his own throat. Not enough to bleed too badly, but it hurt, and it frightened him.

"This just won't do." He had taken to talking to himself as if he might some day get an answer.

"Ran. What say you?" He grasped the tiny figure that hung about his neck. Ran had been silent since the collar went on.

"Nothing to say?" Sulrad yanked at the thong that held the figure of Ran in place. What good was Ran anyway? Maybe he could use the statue to protect himself as he worked at the collar. He jammed the figure between his flesh and the cold iron. Maybe the flat of the blade? This time, he managed to loosen one of the stones. As the stone popped free, there was a tiny whoosh. It was as if something had rushed in to fill the hole left by the stone.

Sulrad placed the tip of the blade into the hole and twisted. It made a grating sound, but that was all. He tapped gently, not wanting to repeat his earlier failure that resulted the flesh wound.

Nothing.

Try as he might, he could not loosen another stone. They were attached as firmly as if the iron had been forged around them. But yet, there was something. Just a tiny bit of magic was now leaking through the collar.

There might yet be a way, but there was no point in waiting around the woods. The longer he remained there, the more danger he was in. This he knew in his heart. The wizards of Amedon were after him. He needed to move on.

He packed his few belongings and set out along the path that led to Frostan.

Before long, he came upon a small town. Hardly more than a wide spot in the road, it sported a handful of hovels, a lean-to, and a pair of mud-brick buildings with rough log roofing. The front of one of the buildings had been

whitewashed and painted with symbols that meant the occupant was acquainted with the lore of herbs and healing.

He'd read up on healing spells and potions. There was a limit to what magic could do, as there was a limit to what potions could do, but together, sometimes they were enough to tip the scales in the favor of one who would otherwise have died. Maybe he could get work as an herbalist assistant or an apprentice healer.

He stuck his head in the doorway. "Hoy, the healer," he called out.

Nothing.

"Hoy, the healer," he repeated.

A voice came from the shadows. "You trying to wake the dead?"

"Looking for the healer," he answered.

"You don't look sick. A bit on the bony side, but otherwise healthy." A woman stepped from the shadows. Her hair had been dark, but not recently. It was shot through with gray. Her features were pronounced as if she hadn't been eating as well as she might. Her nose was sharp with an unattractive bump, but her smile was clear and bright. Not what one would expect on a healer who worked the potions.

"I don't trouble myself about eating as often as I should. My name is Sulrad. I'm an apprentice healer."

"Hmm. An apprentice. You look a bit young to be an apprentice. Maybe the servant of a healer looking to move up in the world through a bit of fast talking."

"Lemon balm on the lips for sores," Sulrad intoned. "Anise paste for corns, oil pressed from olive for ear-ache, apples for the teeth," he continued, favoring her with a raised eyebrow. "But you already knew that. Cloves crushed and sprinkled on a wound to keep it clean, basil to loosen the bowels, crushed onion in a compress to draw the pus from a wound." Sulrad paused. "Need I go on?"

"What was that about cloves?" she asked. "By the way. Name's Ageg."

"Ageg, what sort of name is that?"

"Aren't you a cheeky one? It's my mother's, and her mother's before her. It's a proud family name, Ageg is," she said. "The cloves?"

"Cloves. Crush them, dry them, and sprinkle them on a fresh wound to keep the aether clean. If it's already too late, draw the pus out with onion, then treat with crushed cloves."

"Ever stitch up a wound?" Ageg asked.

"No, but I've seen drawings of how it's done."

Ageg snorted. "Drawings don't do it justice. You need a strong stomach for that sort of work, and a strong arm, or a jug of ale." She snorted again, this time with laughter.

"I'm also looking for a meal," Sulrad said.

"A meal, I can offer. Not much. You can see I don't get fed near as often as I would like myself."

"I don't eat much."

"Don't look as you do. If you'd been all flush with fat, I'd not be offering you a meal, but you look like you're about to fall over from the famishment."

"I'll survive. I've been living off the land. Ditches catch water. Rhubarb and lemon grass mingled with sparrow grass. They make passable fare if you know how to cook them."

"You talk like an educated fella," Ageg said. "Where you get your learning?"

Sulrad flushed. Should he tell her about Amedon? Would she think less of him for having been there and being sent on his way?

Before he could answer, she interjected, "Same folks put that collar on you?"

Sulrad reached up and touched the cold iron. He'd almost forgotten it was there.

"Yes. They did it to keep me subservient."

“Not surprised. Those learned folks want to stay the only ones in power. That thing just for show or is there a purpose to it?” She leaned in for a closer look. “Nice stones there. Real shiny. Some folks say those sorts of stones have magic. Don’t hold with magic. Not that I don’t believe in it. Seen it enough in my days, but I don’t hold with it. Most anything can be healed with the right herbs, but a little magic helps.”

“I’m no wizard. I have no magic.”

“Good. Then you can share my dinner with me. I have root vegetables, onion, and carrots. Tonight, there’s even a bit of hare. It’s gamey and tough. Too old to escape my clutches. There’s just enough left to give the broth a bit of flavor and a few strips of meat. You’re welcome to share.” She gestured to the table. “It won’t be but a moment.”

“No meat for me.” Sulrad shuddered at the thought of eating her meat.

She shrugged. “More for me. Not that I mind sharing, but a girl’s got to keep herself fed now, doesn’t she?” Ageg stifled a laugh.

“I’m grateful for whatever you have to share. Tomorrow, I’ll forage for you and see what we can make together.”

Sulrad pulled out the bench and sat. He folded his hands. “Thanks for this blessing,” he intoned.

“Who you talking to?” Ageg asked.

“It’s my custom to offer thanks for a meal. It’s something my father taught me. Expressing one’s gratitude is a way of bringing good luck,” Sulrad spouted the first thing that came to mind. No reason to mention Ran to the woman. He’d learned that often brought less than favorable treatment.

“Not so lucky for you. That fancy collar of yours just lost one of those gems.” She pointed at Sulrad’s collar.

He reached up and touched it. Sure enough, another crystal was missing. What did that mean? Had Ran removed the crystal? What would it take to remove them all? He was

confident that without the crystals, the collar was no more powerful than the one he had already defeated. As if to answer his own thoughts, there was another whoosh and the weight in his chest increased.

Was he gathering magic? Why had the gem fallen out?

"Give it a moment to cool down," Ageg said, interrupting his thoughts. "Don't want you burning your tongue."

She slid a steaming bowl of soup in front of Sulrad, placed another across from him, and took her seat.

Sulrad took a spoonful, blew on it, and raised it to his lips. It tasted of pepper and onion with a hint of carrot. He wondered where she found the pepper. It was rare and expensive in these parts.

"Can a woman trust a man to sleep on the floor and behave himself?" Ageg asked conversationally.

"If it's the right man," Sulrad said.

"You the right man?"

He smiled. Of course he was the right man. He had no designs on anyone, least of all an aged healer. She reminded him of his mother's mother's mother, the one time he had met the old woman. She was one of the few who seemed not to take an immediate dislike to him. If only she had lived to see him grown and a man in his own right. She had taken him aside one day and whispered that she was just fine with his father's belief in Ran. Live and let live, she always said. It seemed that Ageg was cut from the same cloth, but maybe mentioning Ran was a bit premature.

"Most respectfully, I am. My vow of frugality runs not only to food, but to women as well."

"Well, don't that beat all? Not that you're too old to be unsullied, mind you, but most lads your age can't keep it under control."

"I'll behave. You have my word on that."

"Good, for tomorrow, we're going to make a poultice. You're going to demonstrate your prowess with the herbs and we're going to earn ourselves a copper or two."



Sulrad woke to the nudging of a foot. He tensed himself, ready to fend off an attack, but none came. Ageg stood over him, her face bearing a twisted smile.

"Sun's almost up," she said. "Lazy bones make for bitter soup."

Sulrad blinked back the brilliance from a pair of lamps that hung from the overhead beam. The aroma of soup tugged at his hunger, setting it aflame. He'd eaten little since being ejected from Amedon, and it didn't look as if that were going to change anytime soon.

"I got bread," Ageg said. "Salty, but good."

The woman loomed over Sulrad, the tinge of gray in her hair even more evident this morning than it had been in the light of day.

"Why are you waking me up so early?" Sulrad asked.

"Best time to heal is when the sun first shines on the infirm. Best time for herbs, best time for magic."

"Magic? I thought you were a healer?" Sulrad asked.

"I am, but you're a wizard. I know you said you weren't, but you ain't that good a liar," she explained. "If you ain't a wizard, then you're some sort of priest. Who else wears robes like that?"

Sulrad glanced down at his robe. It was stained and ripped in places, but it did mark him as a wizard. He'd have to do something about that. "I am no wizard."

"What sort of priest are you, then?" she asked. "Your god have any healing powers?"

Sulrad fingered the statue at his neck. Perhaps she had a point. Perhaps he was a priest, a priest of Ran. Certainly Ran had blessed him. Shown him favor. What better way to give thanks than to spread his word?

"I'm a priest of Ran," Sulrad said.

"He a good healer? You can call on him for help? We're going to need it today."

"Why? Who are we healing? You never said."

"We'll see when we get to Frostan. Folks there have plenty of coin. There is always someone with an ailment looking for a potion, or even some rich fella looking for a love potion, if you know what I mean. You do some healing and you can afford to buy yourself some city clothes. Make you look right proper."

Sulrad peered up at Ageg. Was the woman daft? "What makes you think I can heal anyone?"

"That collar. It's magic. I can tell. No use in you denying it. I've heard of those. Wizards use them. Say that it's only put on one with mighty powers."

"How could you know this?" Sulrad thought such things were a well-guarded secret of Amedon.

"I have a friend. A young man who has the power. He lives in Amedon now and comes to visit once in a while. Brings me a haunch of pork when he does, which is not nearly as often as it used to be. Loves my pork and pea soup, he does. He tells me stories about the fair city of Amedon."

"It's not so fair," Sulrad said.

"Ha." Ageg spat. "I knew it. You are a wizard."

"Not anymore."

"Well, no matter. That fancy collar ain't all that it's said to be. Those stones keep falling off like that and soon it will be no more than a hunk of iron with pock marks all over it."

Sulrad reached up and touched the collar. Sure enough, more stones had fallen off.

He searched for the magic that rested in his chest. It felt heavier than before.

He pulled out the crystals he'd found near the crater. They glowed steadily.

His heart skipped a beat.

The collar was losing its effect. Soon he would be able to remove it and he would have access to his full powers once again and, if he was correct about the stones, even more power than he could naturally accumulate.

"I never fancied this." Sulrad ran his finger along the cold iron. Yes. It was failing. He was truly blessed. "It's not much to my liking."

"Well, wizard, priest, or healer — we have a lot of work to do. Best you be getting up." She straightened up and smoothed her dress. "And I want to thank you for being a gentleman and not trying anything funny with me while I slept." She winked at him.

"I gave you my word," Sulrad said.

"Words are just words. It's the actions that define a man." She turned to the hearth. "I have an outhouse. Just round the back. Mind your touch on the lye. I don't have much, but don't want no flies either. Get your business out of the way, then we can have a nice sit down before we get on the road."

BLOOD

SULRAD

After the light morning meal, Ageg led Sulrad along the road to Frostan. It began as a path that cut through a field and a small stand of trees. The path merged onto a dirt road that was little more than wagon ruts in a meadow. By mid-morning, Sulrad and Ageg had passed out of sight of the hamlet where she lived and into the shadow of the great castle. Not that the castle cast a shadow at midday, but it loomed over the land, positioned as it was on a small outcropping of rocks that stood proud against the surrounding fields.

Rows of grain and maize radiated from it like rays of sunlight, the gold and green aligned in ranks like soldiers on parade. Sulrad shuddered. He much preferred the countryside to the city, but foraging for sparse meals was getting old. Coin gravitated to the city, and if he was to earn coin to purchase his own food, he'd need to be in the city. Yet cities were notorious for those who would take advantage of a poor traveler.

"Don't bother none about that," Ageg said when he voiced his fears. "Baron Reik don't hold with magic. Said he had some sort of a problem with a wizard afore his daughter was born and that set him against them all. Not

that you have anything to worry about, being a priest and not a wizard." She favored him with a wink.

"What does he do with wizards?"

"Put them to the flame, but like I said, you've nothing to worry about."

For a moment, Sulrad panicked. The baron hated wizards. What if he, Sulrad, were exposed as a wizard? How would he prove he wasn't? He wanted to seek out Rotiaqua, but that was sure to get him caught. Best he keep to the outskirts, at least until he had the chance to purchase clothes that made him blend in, and even then, healing with magic was risky. With luck, herbs and poultices would work for most of the infirmities he came across. The real magic would have to wait.

"You ever been to Frostan?" Ageg interrupted his thoughts.

"As a child. My father used to take me to the market. He would sell carvings there. We're not going there, are we?"

Ageg laughed. "With you looking like you do? Not today."

That day, she took Sulrad around the outskirts of Frostan, where the poor folk lived. She carried with her an assortment of potions, philartes, and pastes that she sold for a copper or two when she could, and even once for a handful of eggs when the patient had no coin. When they had enough coin, she purchased him a set of clothes, used but in good repair. It made him look as if he belonged amongst the fold of Frostan and eased his fears enough that when the day came that she asked him to use his magic to heal someone, he was no longer as worried about being discovered as he had been. He had devised an argument about his powers that he felt would keep people from talking of a healing wizard.

"There is one who needs a wizard. I've done everything I can for her, but she's not long for this world without your help."

"It's dangerous to use magic. You said so yourself, and my magic is suppressed. I don't see what I can do for her."

"You can try. She needs a healer. Not my sort of healer. Your sort."

"What's wrong with her?" Sulrad thought back to his classes in healing. He was confident that he could recall something for almost any malady.

"She bleeds. Smallest cut and she bleeds like a stuck pig. It takes a ton of this—" Ageg patted her pouch, "just to keep her from bleeding to death."

"That's not a malady," Sulrad said. "You can't cure that."

"Magic don't work the way medicine does. You'll think of something. You're a smart fella."

"I don't have access to my full magic. I may not be able to do anything."

"I have faith in you." She paused. "Just make sure your magic don't show. The baron burned another wizard just a moon ago. Young fella came wandering into Frostan and started doing magic right in the middle of the square. He was just a boy. Had no idea what he was doing, but the baron, he don't care. He threw him in the gaol for half a moon then hung him in the middle of the square with a sign on him telling the townsfolk that he was a wizard and evil. You don't want that."

"So why are you asking me to do magic? Are you trying to get me hung?"

"No. You have that fancy collar on you. It suppresses magic, no? You said as much. It will protect you."

"So what makes you think I'll heal this girl with magic?"

"Like I said. You're a smart one. You'll figure something out." She paused before a small house that edged against its neighbor. The place was clean and in good repair, even though it showed its age. A pair of windows flanked the front door, shutters open, curtains hanging still in warmth of the morning.

Ageg stepped up to the door and rapped. "Healer here." She paused. "Leyta? You home?"

A woman opened the door. She was young, petite, and wore a frown that looked to be permanent.

"How's the little one today?" Ageg asked.

The young woman, Leyta no doubt, grabbed Ageg's arm, pulling her into the house. "I'm so glad you're here. Cyeni is bleeding again. I tried to stop it, but I used up all the powder you gave me last time. I don't know what to do."

Sulrad followed the two women into the interior of the house. It was divided into a kitchen and seating areas with two small bedchambers in the rear. It was to the left one that the woman dragged Ageg.

On the bed lay a small child, no more than four summers in age. The girl had her mother's dark hair and complexion. On her left arm was a bandage, a cloth crudely tied around her arm. It was soaked in red and blood seeped through it to drip onto the bed.

"What happened?" Ageg asked.

"Mommy cut me," the girl said.

Leyta flushed. "I slipped with the knife. It fell. She was playing at my feet. I didn't know she was there. It was an accident. I swear it."

"Hush. No one says otherwise."

"I'm a good mother. I am. Please. It won't stop."

Ageg turned to Sulrad. "This is where you come in."

Sulrad knelt down beside the bed. The girl was flush. She had lost a lot of blood. "You feed her liver on a regular basis?" he asked.

"When I can get it."

"You keep the wound clean? Wash it with hot water?"

"When I can."

"Do you have any handy?"

"I'll fetch some," Leyta said.

When she had left the room, Sulrad turned to Ageg. "What are you expecting me to do here? If I heal her, it is

just a spell to hold the flesh together until she heals on her own. That takes constant power for me to hold it. With her malady, that will take half a moon. I can't hold a spell that long, especially with this thing on me." He gestured to the collar.

"Then find another way." Ageg gestured to the girl. "She's just a child."

"Here." Leyta returned with a bowl of warm water and set it on the bed beside Sulrad.

He removed the bandage from the girl's arm, dipped a clean cloth into the water, and washed the wound. It was several digits in length, a clean gash from a sharp knife. Normally, a wound like that closed pretty quickly, but this one bled as if it had only just occurred.

"Resitituo valentudo in carne." Sulrad spoke the words he had learned in his class in Amedon.

The magic rose up in him, then immediately halted, stymied by the collar.

"Curse you," he muttered.

He tried again, forming the shimmering layer of gossamer around himself. He extended the magic out from his hand to encompass the girl's wound. "Resitituo valentudo in carne," he said once more.

This time, the magic flowed inside his shield and out to the girl. The flesh drew closed, but the blood didn't stop. A red welt appeared on the freshly closed flesh, growing larger and larger as the moments passed.

He panicked.

What had he done? He'd closed her flesh, but the blood continued to flow beneath it.

"It hurts," the girl said.

Now what? The blister raising on her arm was growing. Angry and red, it rose moment by moment.

"Novis," he uttered in a panic, commanding his spell to reverse itself.

The flesh parted and blood gushed forth.

The girl whimpered.

"What did you do?" Leyta demanded.

"Just a misstep," he said. "Give me a moment."

Sulrad searched for a spell that might work. Crassuira denim sangria? Thicken the blood. No, that would not work. Her blood only needed to thicken when she was injured. What could he use? Make her normal? Perhaps that was the trick. "Hoc commune." He imagined the spell flowing through her veins as the magic went to work. For a moment, he panicked. What if it didn't work? What if it had the wrong effect? What if he had just killed the girl?

He rinsed the cloth and wiped away the blood from her arm. The wound looked much the same as it had, but the blood seemed to be slowing down. He pinched the edges of the flesh together and held them there.

The blood stopped.

For a moment, he thought he felt the blood pool beneath the wound once again, but it quickly stopped. After several heartbeats, he released his grasp on her flesh. It held. The wound was closing. The blood flow had stopped.

"Resitituo valentudo in carne." This time, the flesh knit together and remained flat and colorless. It had worked. He'd healed her.

"You did it," Leyta said. "You saved my child."

"It wasn't me," Sulrad said. He'd meant to say it was magic. But the words that came out of his mouth were, "It was Ran's mercy you saw here today."

"I don't care whose power it was. My child is saved. I owe you more than I can ever repay."

"You've suffered enough. No charge for you," Ageg said. She stood and motioned to Sulrad to follow her. Leyta had sunk to the bed and was cradling her child in her arms as if the girl had only just returned for an extended stay away.

"Come on," Ageg said. "Let's give them some privacy."

When they reached the street, Ageg turned to Sulrad. "Who's Ran?"

“My father’s god.” He waved the question away. “I’m not even sure why I said that. It just seemed like the right thing to say.”

“Well, you ask me, it was brilliant. If anyone asks, she will tell him it was your god Ran that healed her daughter. No talk of a wizard at all.” Ageg winked at him. “I said you were a smart guy.”

HEALER

SULRAD

Once more, Sulrad found himself on the road to Frostan. It had become routine and he almost forgot that he was putting himself at risk. He had discovered that his magic was quickly consumed when he performed a healing and that it was more than a double hand of days before he felt himself once more. That limited the number of people he could cure, but it also limited his chances of being declared a wizard and handed over to the baron. It had been a while since he had last used magic, and Ageg had persuaded him it was time to take on a particularly difficult healing, one she had heard of but never attempted. She told him it needed magic. Magic only he could supply.

She led him through a well-off neighborhood, but by no means wealthy. She pulled him to a halt before a house constructed of carved stone, which stood two stories tall. Windows on the second floor were glazed with the clearest glass he had ever seen. They stood open to allow the breeze to flow through the house, as was evident by the sheer silk curtains flapping out of one window. Flanking each window were a pair of shutters of louvered wood painted a dark green that could be closed to keep the rain out, or the cold. On the lower level, a single door stood closed against the

noon-day heat. The door was half again as tall as Sulrad, heavy wood with intricately carved decorations depicting twining vines, pinecones, and acorns.

Beside the door was a small brass handle.

Ageg pulled it and stepped up to the door.

"Ageg and a priest of Ran here to see Danthan. My friend here is a healer of some reputation."

A small brass plate in the center of the door swung open, revealing a pair of eyes of the darkest brown that Sulrad had ever seen. "Haven't I seen you before?" A voice came through the opening. It was low and breathy and definitely female.

"Me you have, but not him." Ageg grasped Sulrad's arm and dragged him before the door. "He's a priest. Didn't you hear me say that?"

"You a healer?" the eyes asked.

"Yes, humble though I am." Sulrad bowed.

"Don't need humble," the voice said. "We need a powerful healer."

The brass plate slammed shut.

Sulrad turned to Ageg. "Sorry. Looks like they aren't interested."

"Hang on there." Ageg pulled the handle again with vigor.

The brass place opened once more.

This time, the eyes were filled with rage.

"How dare you? I said we don't need humble. If you have to apologize for your ineptitude before even attempting to heal someone, then we don't need you."

"I ain't never seen skill like his." Ageg leaned close to the door and whispered, "He's a priest and his god is a powerful healer."

"No magic. You know wizards aren't allowed in Frostan."

"Not a wizard. A *priest*," Ageg said.

"Priest, huh? What god you say you worship?" The voice softened.

"Ran. The all knowing and all seeing." Sulrad said. It gave him pause to speak it aloud, but it also gave him pride. Perhaps this was what Ran had been leading him to all his life.

"All knowing and all seeing I don't care about, but does he have power?"

Sulrad touched the collar at his neck. It was weakening. He had access to his magic, if not yet its full power. "Ran has power aplenty."

"Enough to heal the most extreme infirmity?"

"Certainly, although Ran does not bestow his favor on just anyone," Sulrad answered. "One must be proven worthy."

"The one who needs him is more than worthy," came the words through the door.

The brass door slammed shut and for a moment, Sulrad thought they were being dismissed once more, but the sound of scraping behind the door gave him hope.

"We're in," Ageg said. "I knew you were going to bring me luck."

The door swung open, the hinges protesting as it did. For a moment, Sulrad thought no one was there.

"Down here." The same voice that had come through the door spoke from somewhere around his waist.

Sulrad glanced down. A woman half his height stood holding the door open. She had short stubby legs and arms and pudgy fingers, but otherwise, she was stunningly beautiful. Shoulder-length black hair framed a face that bore a pert nose and full lips stained with a brilliant shade of red. Her eyelids were painted with a dark sea blue that accented the deep brown of her eyes.

"You never seen a half height before?" she demanded.

"No, and not one so strikingly beautiful." The words slipped from his mouth before he had a chance to think.

"Well, thank you." The woman smiled and fluttered her eyes at him. "The boy is back here." She turned and

sauntered away, swinging her hips in time to her awkward gait. "Come on. Follow me. And don't forget to latch the door."

"Go on." Ageg gave Sulrad a shove and stepped inside. She closed the door with a thud. "You got a way with words. That I can see," Ageg whispered.

"Just being honest," Sulrad muttered.

"That makes it all the more enticing," Ageg said. "Making friends with Ignal. Never seen that done before. I've heard her throw folks out just for glancing in her direction with the wrong look on their face."

Sulrad flinched. The richness of the home made him uncomfortable, and that had pushed him into the pattern of polite speech that had often calmed his father. Was that the way of it? Was he still a poor farmer, intimidated by the wealth of others? He'd have to watch himself. "I believe in treating everyone with respect until they prove me wrong," Sulrad explained.

"Good path for all to take. Your god Ran teach you that?" Ageg asked.

"Ran is merciful to all."

"Sounds like the sort of god an old woman could find room for in her life. Let's hope he has power enough to heal this lad."

"He's in here," Ignal said. She gestured to an open door where silk curtains fluttered in the breeze.

Sulrad felt a hand on his back as Ageg shoved him forward. "Come on. He don't bite, and if you're afraid of his infirmity, how will you ever stand a chance of healing him?"

Sulrad stepped into the room. It was clean and smelled of lye. A bed filled the far corner beside a window. Four posts of dark rich wood had been carved into the shape of tree trunks with pixies and forest creatures. The canopy, rich red with bold embroidery, was stretched tight above it. A spread matching the canopy had been turned back, exposing a pair of pillows. The pillows puffed out as if overly

stuffed with goose down. The sheets sparkled white, but the bed was empty.

A voice came from the shadows. "Over here,"

Sulrad peered into the dimly lit corner. A boy of about eleven summers in age sat on a stark wooden chair. He leaned back, but tipped the chair onto all four legs when Sulrad approached.

"Let me see you," Sulrad said.

"You a healer? I don't like healers. None of them have been able to help. Can you?"

The boy stepped from the shadows.

His face was misshapen, his lip split, his nose pushed to one side by the gap in his flesh that extended upwards. It was something Sulrad had seen in the books on healing. The boy wasn't infirm; he was defective.

"You were born like that, weren't you?" Sulrad asked.

The boy looked at his feet.

"Come. That's not a disease," Sulrad said. "That's your natural state. It's why they can't heal you."

"Is there nothing you can do for me? I'm hideous." The boy wept.

Ignal rushed over and took his hand, patting it with her stubby short fingers.

"You've upset him. Please leave," she said. "I knew no one could help him. They told me he would be like this. It was my curse, they said."

"I can help," Sulrad said.

"You just said there *was* no help, that he has no infirmity," Ignal said.

"I did, yes, but not long ago, I was able to heal one for whom there was no hope. I've read about this sort of thing. I think I see a way to heal him," Sulrad said. "Place him on the bed where I can see better and let me examine him. I have an idea."

"Don't give him any false hope," Ignal said.

“Not false hope. True hope. Ran is powerful and merciful.”

“He best be.” Ignal led the boy to the bed. She pulled a short step from beneath it and climbed up, settling on the mattress beside him. In the sunlight, Sulrad saw the resemblance. They both had the same striking eyes and strong chin. Was Ignal his mother, then, or his sister?

“Come. Look closely,” Sulrad told Ageg. “See how the skin is split but there is no scar? This is a defect in the child that was acquired well before birth. It’s uncommon, but not as uncommon as one would like.”

“I seen that once before,” Ageg explained. “The woman who bore the child had a fondness for knives. She was always playing with a fancy flick knife. Used to sit there clicking it open and shut all day while she talked. Like as drive a person crazy. We all told her it was a bad thing, but she never listened. When the child came out, it was like that. Knife gash all the way up.”

“I didn’t play with blades,” Ignal said.

He’d had his suspicions, but now he was certain of it. She was the boy’s mother. How she must have suffered trying to get healing for her son. His heart went out to her. To have a child that she loved so much despite his deformity. If only his own mother had been like that, but she hadn’t. She’d pushed him out at the fist sign he did not meet her expectations.

“So you’re the mother, then?” Sulrad asked.

“Can you help him?” Her eyes brimmed with tears.

“Let me see.” Sulrad reached up and touched the collar. Only one stone remained. If that were gone, he was certain he could remove the collar and gain access to his full power.

He reached for his magic. It was weak, but it was there. He tested it. He had control of what little there was. He extended his senses, creating a ghostly image of his hand as he passed it slowly over the boy’s face. His physical hand hovered in the air, but the ghostly appendage dove deep

into the gash on the boy's face. The flesh was all there, but for some reason, it had not been knit together as it should have. Was there a way to remind the flesh what it was meant to do?

He racked his brain, searching for a spell that he might employ. There were plenty of spells that could be used to knit an injury back together, but they all depended on the flesh to knit back together using the blood that flowed from the wound.

"Let me try something." Sulrad reached for his sky iron knife. It was as sharp as any razor he had ever seen and would make a clean cut.

"What are you doing?" Ignal asked.

"Please hold his hands while I do this. I'm afraid it might hurt a bit. I'll try to be gentle."

"You're going to cut him?" Ignal demanded.

"It's the only way I know to get the flesh to knit together," Sulrad said.

"I won't allow it."

"Then he will remain as he is."

"Better than dead."

"It won't kill him. I just need to make a small cut so the flesh can knit together." Sulrad held up the knife, letting the light from the window catch the blade.

"You can trust the lad," Ageg said. "He knows his healing."

Ignal closed her eyes tight, tears escaping the painted lids. "Go ahead. But don't make me watch."

Sulrad took the sky iron knife and gently sliced the skin of the gash on the boy's face.

The boy winced, but he held his peace. Sulrad wondered what horrors the boy had been through as the various healers attempted to heal him, or more likely attempted to separate his mother from her gold. He must be frightened, but here he sat, calm and quiet even as blood seeped from the wound.

"A towel?" Sulrad asked, reaching behind him without looking.

"Here." Ageg handed him a white cloth decorated with embroidery.

It was fine and delicate and he hated to stain it, but it was best if there wasn't too much blood.

"Instructi in carne una," Sulrad intoned. "Ad hoc totem."

He visualized the now raw flesh drawing together and knitting into a single whole as it should have in the womb. The gash on the boy's face would draw itself shut, and the skin would knit itself together. That was what he hoped. If he was right. If Ran had truly favored him.

"Ran, bless this boy," Sulrad said. He reached for the glimmer of his magic, guiding it toward the flesh and the stained towel. But was it enough?

His chest swelled with pressure, as if the magic was trying to get out. He sensed the glow coming from the stones he had secreted in his pockets. It was working. He had access to his magic, if only on a limited basis.

He glanced at the boy. Slowly, the flesh drew together and joined. Skin grew over the seam, and the blood ceased. Sulrad leaned in to get a closer look. The gash had closed, but it had left a nasty scar. He summoned his magic once more, but it was almost completely gone. There was nothing else he could do.

"He will bear a scar to remind him, but the flesh is healed." Sulrad sat up and heard a clink as another jewel fell from his collar. He reached up and grasped the iron, thinking to remove it, but he possessed no more magic, and there was yet a jewel remaining.

Without warning, he was knocked from his feet by the impact of Ignal crashing into him. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she kissed his face repeatedly. "Thank you, oh thank you. I will be forever in your debt. Tell me how I can do homage to your god and you have my faith for as long as I live."

He had only done what little he could to help. The boy reminded him of himself. Abused and despised for something out of his control. It threw him, seeing Ignal grovel like that. No one had ever been grateful for his help before. It warmed his heart and made his day just a little brighter. He could get used to that feeling. Perhaps that was what Ran had in mind for him? To heal the sick and infirm.

"I only seek to do honor to Ran," Sulrad said.

"And you have. This is for him." She reached into her pocket and retrieved two gold pieces. They were heavier than Sulrad expected, for he had only ever imagined what a gold piece felt like. He had never thought to hold one, much less possess one. What response did one give to someone who had bestowed more wealth on him than he ever imagined he would possess?

"I'm only happy to serve," Sulrad said and slipped the golds into his pocket.

IGNAL

SULRAD

Over the next half moon, Sulrad grew accustomed to the daily walk into town. He healed those he could and sat with them as much time as he could spare. He spoke of Ran and how his god provided the healing that Sulrad simply channeled. If he attributed the healing to Ran, there would be no talk of a wizard in Frostan, and Sulrad was growing bolder as he garnered success. At times, he almost felt the power of Ran at work, or at least he felt the statue warm against his flesh as he called up his own magic. He wasn't certain which one it was.

On the afternoon of a most difficult healing, Sulrad and Ageg sat outside of an inn and enjoyed a meal together. The woman had filled out nicely after taking advantage of the coin they both earned. It wasn't much, but Sulrad didn't need much.

"A sweet-meat pie for me and root vegetables for the lad here," Ageg told the serving girl who came to take their order. "Ale for both."

"Right away, ma'am."

"Wait." Sulrad called the girl back. "No gravy on the root vegetables. Butter, a little salt, no meat. And no ale for me. I'll take tea or water if you have no tea."

"You sure? The cook is excellent. Folks around here say his pork gravy is to die for."

"I prefer not to eat meat. No insult to the cook."

"Fine with me." She winked at Sulrad. "Be back in a heartbeat."

"Still no meat?" Ageg asked. "You're nothing but skin and bones."

"It was that last healing. It took a lot out of me."

"I see that. I'll try to find folk who only need a touch of your special power."

Ageg scanned the crowd as if searching for a likely candidate. She leaned in and whispered, "You have a follower."

Sulrad followed her gaze. The diminutive woman whose son he had healed was loitering around the street. He swore she was staring at him but looked away when he caught her eye.

"The woman? Ignal?"

"She's been following us for the last few days. Looks at you like you're a fresh piece of holiday ham and she's starving."

"What do you know of her?" Sulrad asked.

"Little more than you. Her bond-mate is a successful merchant. Owns his own fleet of ships, he does. Swimming in gold, they say. She could buy either of us ten times over and still have gold left to feed the poor for a summer and then some."

"Why is she following us?"

"Not us. You." Ageg threw a glance in Ignal's direction. "I think she's a bit mad. She spent most of her time locked in that house with the boy. Never went out. Never talked to anyone. Must have been a lonely life." Ageg shrugged. "She moved back home when the boy was healed, but they say she's no longer welcome there. Her bond mate ignores her and he's taken to teaching the boy all about the trade. I think she's just lonely, and since you are the only man she's

met in a hand of summers, she's sort of soft on you. And you did heal her son. Sort of makes you her hero."

"Well. There's no reason to let her stand over there like that." Sulrad stood up and called to her. "Ignal? That you?"

Ignal sauntered over to the table. As she drew near, the serving girl rushed from the kitchen with a thick cushion. She pulled out a chair and placed the cushion on it.

Ignal stepped on the rung of the chair and hoisted herself up onto the cushion.

"I've heard rumors that you are healing the sick and feeding the poor," she said.

"I do what I can."

"Why only the peasants?" Ignal asked.

"Because they need me. I am but a poor peasant myself."

"No. You are a mighty one. I can tell."

Sulrad flinched. Kelnor had called him that. He hadn't liked it then. He didn't like it now.

"I'm no mighty one."

"You are to me. You brought my son back to me. I am in your debt."

"No debt," Sulrad said. "I'm just glad I could help."

"I never did thank you enough." Ignal reached into her pocket and withdrew a pair of gold coins, tossing them on the table.

He picked one up. It felt wrong. How often had Merten told Sulrad that Ran hated those who accumulated more than they needed. What would Merten think if Sulrad kept the gold? He had quickly disposed of the gold she had given him earlier. He couldn't take more. What would Ran think? How could he accept this while preaching the gospel of poverty to the folks he healed? "I don't want your gold." He tossed the coin back on the table.

"Yes, you do." Ignal shoved the coin at him. "How else can I thank you?"

"I told you. No thanks needed. I don't need your charity."

"I could use a bit of charity." Ageg snatched one of the golds from the table and pocketed it.

"See," Ignal said. "No reason to refuse."

"No thanks." Sulrad slid the gold back toward Ignal.

"It's yours now. I'm not taking it back."

The server returned with two platters, one bearing three sweet-meat pies and a smattering of roast vegetables. She set that one in front of Ageg. The other bore a single root vegetable, roasted and sliced in half. The halves bore a faint yellow stain where butter had melted and soaked into the white of the tuber.

The girl turned to Ignal. "For you, ma'am?"

Ignal glanced at Sulrad. "I'll have what he's having."

"Ma'am. That's just a root vegetable with butter. Certainly you'd enjoy something more to your liking?"

"No. I eat what he eats."

"Very good, ma'am." The girl nodded at the gold coin. "I can't change that."

"I didn't ask you to," Ignal said.

"But. The entire meal for the three of you is but a silver and five."

"That's fine. If you wish, ask the cook to take extra care with my roasted root vegetable." Ignal waved the girl away. "If you will not take my generosity, at least let me introduce you to others who need your healing. Those with more to offer than the peasants you serve."

"You want me to heal your rich friends?"

"Not my friends. I have few enough of those, but I am well connected in society. Or my name is. I can make introductions to those who can afford much more than I offer you. Would you take their coin?"

"No. I don't want gold."

"What if that gold allowed you to purchase more bread and meat to feed those poor and hungry? What about exotic herbs and potions that can only be found in far-off lands? I can provide access to such as these where few can. I can

help you expand your sphere of influence. I've heard you speak of Ran and his powers. I only want to help."

"Why would you do this?"

"Because of Danthan. Ran has healed my son. Brought him back to me. I told you I could never repay you. But, your god. He sounds like he could use a bit of help. I can secure access to the wealthy, the influential. You heal a few of them and they will no doubt tell others of your prowess and your god will gain followers. It only makes sense. How many of the poor and destitute can do such a thing for you?"

"There's nothing wrong with being poor."

"I never said there was. It's just so much more fun being wealthy. You should try it."

"Ran despises those who hoard more than is their due. He wants a man to work for his bread, not rest on his accomplishments. He looks down on those who consume more than they need. Those who accumulate more than is required to maintain their bodies for the day. He wants us to depend on him for all our needs, not ourselves, and most certainly not others."

"What if the gold were not yours? Certainly Ran is not opposed to wealth, or else he would not allow it to accumulate in the hands of the wealthy. See how much good they do with it? A rich man employs many servants. He feeds not only his own family, but the families of those who serve him. The cook that prepares his meals uses the wages he pays her to feed her own family, as does the coachmen who drives him around, and the guards who protect him. Why, some of the folk I know have half a hundred servants. How could that be bad? What if Ran were to do the same? How could that be a bad thing?"

Sulrad pondered her words. Was she right? What would Ran do with golds? How much more healing could he perform with the exotic herbs he had only read about?

As if she could read his mind, she said, "I see I've given you enough to think about for now. When you've decided, come see me. I'll introduce you around. We will make a good pair, you and I."

She hopped from her chair and rushed off, leaving Sulrad alone with Ageg.

When the server returned bearing a plate with a single root vegetable on it, she paused.

"She left?" the girl asked.

"Fraid so," Sulrad replied.

"But she didn't pay."

"Take the gold." Sulrad indicated the single coin resting in the center of the table.

The girl hesitated.

It was her undoing.

Ageg snatched the gold from the table and pocketed it. She dropped a silver and five coppers on the table and smiled. "There you go."

BARONY

SULRAD

T rue to her word, Ignal had arranged for Sulrad to heal others in her social circle, many of whom were even more generous than she was. In short order, Sulrad had more gold than he had ever imagined possessing, or rather, Ran had more gold than Sulrad had ever imagined possessing. Still, it gnawed at him, filling him with unease. What would Ran do to him for accumulating such vast wealth? He reminded himself it was not him who was accumulating the wealth but Ran. And he had shared much of the wealth with Ageg. He had grown used to her company. She convinced him to purchase a home near the market, but not so near as to be bothered by the sounds and smells of those who bought and sold there. On a windy day, the odor of fowl dung and rotten meat still made it all the way from the market. Even the brilliant blue shutters were not enough to keep the sun out, but most days, things were pleasant enough. Sulrad had reluctantly agreed to purchase a bed for Ageg and one for himself, but he steadfastly refused to purchase more than one set of clothes for his everyday needs and had abandoned his small clothes as soon as he could.

“You must be the envy of the town with all the gold you have saved.” Ageg sat before the iron stove brewing up a

batch of nettle weed that would form the basis of the potions she sold. She had earned some renown as a healer herself, even if it was Sulrad who had a hand in most of her successes. The collar still bothered him, but with the last healing he had performed, the final stone fell free. The healing had taken all his magic and left him too exhausted to attempt anything more for half a moon, and he was only now recovering.

It was time.

As he had done in Amedon, he reached for the magic within the crystals. He felt it there, as if it had a different flavor or a different color. It was like a cold current running inside a warm river. Something that didn't belong there.

He seized that magic and guided it toward the collar, encouraging it to twist and turn as it wrapped itself around the sky iron. In his mind's eye, the foreign magic was a crimson thread that wrapped tightly around the shimmering silver of the sky iron until all that showed were the thin strands of red interspersed with the tiniest thread of silver.

He grasped the collar in his hands, but the iron burned his flesh where it came into contact with it.

He jerked his hands away, expecting to see blisters on his fingers, but there was nothing there. The pain was all in his head.

He tried again.

His fingers sizzled as his flesh came into contact with the smoldering iron. Each heartbeat was torture, pure agony, but he gritted his teeth and hung on, pulling at the iron with all his might.

At first, nothing happened. The iron lay against his skin, growing hotter and hotter by the moment. When the agony was almost too great to withstand, Sulrad noticed that the collar had become insubstantial, almost ghostly. It was as if the collar had been transformed into an insubstantial

artifact, much like those he encountered when he traversed the void.

Maybe that was the thing he needed.

He called up the void, just as he did when he had traveled from Amedon.

When the shimmering portal appeared in the air before him, Sulrad poked his head into it.

Just his head.

As he did, he felt the sky iron collar slide through his neck.

He released it, burned fingers screaming with agony.

The collar clattered to the floor.

Sulrad withdrew his head and dismissed the portal. The shimmering silver surface disappeared with a pop.

He sat back.

The collar was gone.

He was free.

His magic welled up in his chest, filling a hole that he had not known had existed. It was heady, almost the way it had been when he took the magic from those thieves. He saw the world around him in all its grit and grime. People walked the streets around his home, some intent on their own lives, but a few lingering there hoping for his appearance, yearning for the touch of his hand that was rumored to bring healing.

Certainly Ran was not angry with him.

He had the touch of a god. He was special. He was certain of it.

But something was wrong. The field of magic around him rippled and distorted.

Something had arrived. Something sinister.

A rap on his door sent dust floating into the air.

It was insistent and demanding.

Was it the patrol come to take him away for practicing magic against the baron's law?

Sulrad and Ageg had been most careful not to heal anyone publicly, nor take more than was their due. Everyone seemed happy to have the healing they purveyed. No one would have reported him to the baron for that, would they? Then who would be knocking at his door like that?

A voice came from the other side of the door. "Sulrad?"

"Who's asking?"

There was a resounding crack. Wood shattered. The door burst open. In stepped a tall, thin, young wizard with the traditional blue robes. In his hand he held a curved sword that had the look of sky iron.

"I'm here to take you back," he said. "Or kill you. It matters not to me. Did you not consider that there were other spells on that collar? Spells that would alert the wizards of Amedon should you devise a way to remove it?"

"I'm not going back," Sulrad said.

"You are. Alive or dead."

"I'm not going back." Sulrad backed toward the sleeping chamber. He wanted to lead the man away from Ageg and away from the kitchen. No use in getting them both killed.

"Don't run. There's no place to go. Come with me and this will all be over soon." The wizard took another step toward Sulrad.

"I'll go with you," he said. "Let me gather my things." Sulrad needed a moment to collect his thoughts, find a way out of this predicament, but what? He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Ageg should have backed away, but instead she lifted the heavy pot from the stove and was advancing on the wizard from behind. If he could just keep the wizard distracted for a moment longer.

"Please," Sulrad begged.

Ageg drew back the pot and launched the steaming liquid at the wizard.

He screamed and crumpled to the floor, steam rising from his hair and robe.

"That'll teach you to barge into someone's house while they're making potions," Ageg said.

"You daughter of a sow. You burned me." The wizard started to rise to his feet, using the curved knife for support. His skin was red and blistering, but he wasn't dead, far from it.

"I'm not going back." Sulrad lunged at the wizard, drawing his own blade as he did. The sky iron sliced through the wizard's robes and slid between his ribs almost without hesitation.

The wizard's eyes went wide, then dulled as the life drained from them.

"That's enough of that." Sulrad sat down heavily. His breathing was labored and fast. His head spun, stars forming around them. No. Not stars. Magic. The wizard's magic had been released just like before.

Sulrad reached for the magic. He tried to direct it. It fought him at first, but eventually, it bent to his will. The green and gold sparks of power swirled around him at his command. The magic gathered itself before him in a cloud of brilliant gold and green before rushing straight for his chest. It struck him with such impact that his chair tipped up.

He leaped to his feet, staggering, almost unable to maintain his balance. As the magic soaked into him, he came to know his attacker. He was a young wizard, barely old enough to have the magic come awake in him. The boy had been summoned and was on his way to Amedon. What cowards. They were using untrained boys to do their despicable work.

Sulrad took his seat and stilled his breathing. He waited until the magic had settled in him and searched inside himself. There was plenty of magic there, more than ever, but not enough to account for the power of the boy.

As if in answer to his confusion, Sulrad's pack fell to the floor, spilling the handful of crystals he had recovered from

the sky iron crater. They glowed with the brightness of the sun.

Sulrad glanced over at the body of the young wizard. The last thing he needed was to have to explain a dead stranger. He held out his hand. "Incendio ignius."

A fireball appeared, floating above his outstretched hand. He pushed it toward the body. With a whoosh, the body was gone. The light gray ashes floated in the air, caught the breeze, and gently wafted out the window.

Ageg settled into a chair, banging the pot on the table. "No one breaks into my home and threatens my family." She glanced at the glowing crystals. "You best keep that a secret."

"I'm not a wizard. I'm a priest."



As the days passed, the crowds grew thicker outside their door. Sulrad and Ageg were often forced to sneak out of their own home under cover of darkness in order to avoid the crowds. So many sick and infirm pressed around the place. At first he thought it a sign of Ran's favor, but soon he realized that no one cared for him or his god. All they wanted was healing, and some of them had been back often enough that he knew them by name. Garen had a bad well. Sulrad had told him to fill it in and dig a new one, but he kept drinking the sour water and falling ill from it. When he came to see Sulrad, he begged for healing and claimed he had no coin.

Jurten had the pus in his leg. Sulrad had cleared it up several times and admonished the man to put an onion poultice on it until it was clear, but the man refused. Didn't like the smell, he had said the last time he hobbled over with yellow pus oozing from his leg.

None of these folk cared much beyond their immediate need. Not like Ignal. She visited him every few days with gifts of food and restated her heartfelt thanks for the healing of her son. She constantly asked what she could do to aid him in his cause. She was truly eager to help and asked nothing in return. Why couldn't the throng outside his door be more like her? Perhaps it was the wealthy he should be serving. They, at least, showed a modicum of gratitude, even if it was in the form of gold. Perhaps it was because they had more to lose and the poor had less to lose. Was that the difference? Whatever it was, he was growing weary of the masses of unwashed poor that pressed upon him daily.

"I'm tired of this," Sulrad told Ageg. "Come with me. I have an idea."

"You not going to heal anyone today?" Ageg gathered her potions and filled her bag with them.

"Not these. I've already healed most of them, and they don't listen."

"You just now learning that?" she cackled. "I've known that most of my life."

"If just one of them showed proper gratitude, I'd be happy."

"No, you wouldn't. You have one, and you want two. You won't be happy until everyone is properly grateful, then you will complain that they aren't grateful enough, I know how it goes."

"I'm not greedy. Ran punishes those who seek to enrich themselves. But the wealthy seem to show gratitude where the poor do not. Not just because of their ability to pay, but they seem truly grateful."

"So what's this plan of yours?" she asked.

"We're going to relieve a few of those with too many golds of the heavy burden they bear. They are always more grateful than these." He waved his hand at the door.

"You've gotten high and mighty all of a sudden, have you?"

"No. It's just the ingratitude of these folk is becoming hard to bear. I need to distance myself from them, if only for a day."

"Well, I don't have a problem healing a few rich folk," Ageg said. "They do pay well and my gold is running a bit low. I'm not like you. I like the things that only coin buys."

"And coin you shall have." Sulrad donned his robe and pushed through the crowd. At first, the people followed, but as they made their way into the more affluent part of town, the crowd thinned as if afraid to be seen in such a place. By the time Sulrad and Ageg reached Ignal's residence, there was no one following.

Ignal's city residence was nothing like the modest house where Sulrad had first met her. This dwelling was palatial, constructed of worked and smoothed marble. The exterior was as plain as any. The real wealth was inside. Ignal said adornment was for the enjoyment of her family and not the passing throng. The same was true of the intricately constructed garden that filled the center of the house.

In the garden, Ignal had planted a selection of rare herbs that Sulrad told her would greatly assist in his healing. She had tended them personally until the garden was established before allowing the servants to take over the task.

"This is a surprise." Ignal greeted Sulrad and Ageg with a smile, as she always did. "A pleasant surprise, but a surprise nonetheless."

Ignal climbed onto a short step stool that had been tucked beside the door. She reached out to Sulrad and threw her arms around his neck, squeezing until he thought he would faint away.

"It is so good to see you," she said.

"How is the boy?" Sulrad asked.

"He's off with his father on a trade mission. They set sail yesterday and aren't due back for half a moon. Fair winds and a following sea and all that." She laughed and climbed down the steps. "What brings you to my door? Just miss my pretty face?" she asked.

"Of course I missed you, but I have a request to make."

"You looking for coin? I can give you whatever you want."

"No. I don't want your coin. I want a chance to heal a few more people who may be as appreciative as you are. I'm beset by the small folk who care not for their own bodies and don't follow my advice. It's like sifting water with a fork."

"That's an image." Ignal snorted. "There is one, but he's the baron's man. Not as friendly as I'd want, but his daughter is ill. She fell sick with the flux a few days ago, and the local healers haven't been able to help. I can take you there if you want."

"That would be fine. I'm not certain I can help, but that's the sort of patron I am looking for."

"Good. Let me grab my bag and we can go." Ignal waddled out of the room to return moments later with a huge handbag that when slung over her shoulder almost touched the ground. "He's not far from here."

As they stepped into the street, Ignal grabbed Sulrad's hand. "Keep your steps short, won't you?"

"I'll try."

"You're tall, even for a human. It's hard to keep up."

He wished she would let go of his hand. He was not accustomed to affection and certainly not to displaying it so openly. At first, he had worried that Ignal's bond mate would be jealous, but the man just laughed and said that there was little he could do if his mate decided to take up with another man, and besides, she had never given him cause to worry. She loved everyone who loved her, without limit, without reservation.

"Here." Ignal pulled him to a stop before a house that was even grander than her own, if that was possible. It rose three floors above the street. Harp music wafted down from the third-floor balcony. A pair of guards flanked the entrance, clad in armor of polished silver that must have cost more than Sulrad's own home.

"Wolra's a patron of the arts," Ignal explained.

Wolra was a slight man with a sour disposition. He let them in only after Ignal declared that they were the most powerful healers in the land. He grudgingly escorted them to his daughter's room and stood beside her bed, hands planted firmly on his hips.

Sulrad was uncomfortable amongst such wealth. Every hanging was purple with intricate weaves of gold shot through it. The harpist was a young woman who wore a servile collar much like the one Sulrad had worn, only hers was to mark her as property, not to suppress any magic.

"Four days she has refused to get out of bed," Wolra explained.

Sulrad nodded to the young girl in the bed. "Mind if I have a look?"

"Be gentle with her. She's in a lot of pain."

Sulrad sat on the bed beside the girl. He stretched out his hand and focused his thoughts, calling forth his magic. He created his ghost-hand and plunged it into her. Her heart was fine. Her stomach was fine, but empty. He followed her bowels until he came to a spot where they were twisted and pinched together. Nothing was getting through there.

"She has a knot in her bowels. Has she eaten anything strange or gone anywhere strange lately?" Sulrad asked.

"No. Nothing unusual. She just started refusing food, then water, and hasn't allowed anything to pass her lips in days."

"She's near death," Sulrad said.

"That's the only reason I let you in," Wolra said. "Can you do anything to help her?"

"I may. It won't be easy. The damage is severe. She may not last the day without help."

"Do something quickly, then," Wolra demanded.

"I'll do my best. But it's not my decision. If Ran chooses, she may yet live."

Sulrad stretched out his hand once more. The twist in the bowel was backing up rotting food. If he wasn't careful, he could cause more damage than the girl had already suffered, but if he did nothing, she would be dead before the day was out, of that he was certain.

He plunged his ghostly fingers into the girl's abdomen and began rearranging her bowels until he had the twist exposed. If he could just turn it a bit, the twist would open up and she would once again be able to eat, and that was what she needed the most.

He gently twisted the bowel.

At first, it looked hopeful, but it had been bound up for too long. The bowel broke, and putrefied food spilled out in a great rush.

The girl cried out in pain.

"Do something," Wolra demanded.

Sulrad reached for his magic. His personal stores, the ones he now had access to without the collar, were perilously low. The crystals were nearly dark. He'd used up more than he thought he even had, but it did no good. The girl was dying. There was nothing he could do. Not even his healing hand was working anymore.

He'd failed. It pained him to utter the words. "There is nothing to do. She is beyond any healer now."

Sulrad rose, but Wolra shoved him back on the bed.

"Heal her. Now," he demanded.

"There is no healing. She is already gone." As Sulrad spoke the words, the girl took a deep breath and let it out.

Her eyes opened, and she stared at the ceiling. With one last exhale, she expired.

Sulrad felt the spirit go out of her.

"You will pay for this," Wolra shouted. "The baron doesn't hold with wizards. He'll thank me for discovering one right under his nose."

A pair of armed guards entered and quickly bound Sulrad's arms behind his back. "Gag him. I don't want him using magic on you."

"What are you doing?" was all Sulrad managed before the gag was pulled tight.

The guard drew his arms behind him and bound them with rope.

"He didn't do anything wrong," Ignal shouted.

"That's for the baron to decide."

AUDIENCE

SULRAD

Sulrad had been in the gaol for a hand of days before he was chained and dragged in front of the baron. Archers with their crossbows flanked the room and guards stood on either side of the baron, but it was the woman seated on the dais beside the man that caught his eye. It was the girl. Rotiaqua. The one he had seen so often in the fire. His heart raced. She was the baron's own daughter, and she had magic. Surely she would intercede on his behalf. She wouldn't let him die, would she? They were friends. Old friends.

He reached for his magic, but something blocked it. Something not unlike the collar. Something created a counter spell to everything he tried.

"Well. What do you have to say for yourself?" the baron demanded.

Sulrad startled. He'd been so focused on detecting the baron's magic that he'd almost forgotten that his life was in jeopardy. Stall. Keep looking.

"I have nothing to say on my behalf." He looked the baron straight in the eye. Confidence was something the powerful respected. He would not cower. "I am the voice of Ran," he said. "I speak on his behalf."

"And who, pray tell, is Ran?" The baron leaned back in his chair and relaxed.

Rotiaqua leaned forward as if to get a closer look. She was intrigued. Good. Maybe he could use that. Gain her sympathy if nothing else.

"He is the one true god, My Lord," Sulrad explained.

The baron laughed. "The one true god? So you expect me to believe that there's only one god? And you're his personal spokesman?"

"Yes, My Lord. He has sent me to help you." Here was his avenue of escape.

Rotiaqua was fully engaged now. Was it his talk of Ran, or did she recognize him?

"I'm a healer. Not unlike your daughter." He inclined his head toward the girl.

She winced.

"She's no healer." The baron waved his hand at the guard. "I've heard enough. Take this fool away. Put him in the stocks for the day and then hang him."

Sulrad panicked. Was he about to die?

What was suppressing his magic?

What had the baron done?

He let his power wander. It felt like the whole castle was encircled with sky iron. He knew how to defeat that. He created the ghostly covering that contained his magic, just as he had done when in the collar. He drew on his reserves. The days in the gaol had allowed him to replenish his magic, not as much as he would have liked and the baron's protection was still dampening it, but perhaps there was a way.

He sent his ghostly hand questing for the sky iron.

There.

A thin band of the substance was sunken deep into the moat surrounding the castle.

He reached out.

Creating fire beneath water was going to be a challenge.

He concentrated, heedless of the baron's outrage at being ignored.

There.

He had it.

He created a small fireball.

He brought that fireball into contact with the sky iron.

It fought him, but he maintained his focus.

He felt his power fading.

He grasped for more.

A stream of foreign power flowed into him.

The band of sky iron melted, leaving those around the moat to wonder why it had suddenly begun to boil.

Let them wonder.

He had done it. He was free of the spell.

He reached for the magic around him and drew it to him.

The foreign magic withdrew as his own returned.

Was it Ran that he had called on? He had no time to wonder. The baron was standing screaming at him. Rotiaqua sat in her chair, head in her hands, weeping as if she had been attacked.

Sulrad cupped his hands together. "Incendio ignio," he whispered, calling up his magic to power a small fireball between his hands. Not too large, but not too small either. He wanted to make a show of this. He let the glow of the fire escape his hands and then slowly pulled them apart. The girl gasped. Yes, it was her, and she recognized magic when she saw it. He shook his arms, flipping the short chain around, and it slipped into the fireball. The rusty chain flared and disappeared, sending sparks flying.

He extended his hand, holding out the fireball, infusing it with magic, letting the power grow more and more radiant.

Rotiaqua gasped and glared at him.

Sulrad stretched out his hand to the baron. "I said I was here to aid you. I plan to help your people whether you like it or not. I found how you were able to defeat the wizards who came before me. It was pathetic. Nothing for one of my

powers to defeat. You no longer have a hold on me. I am free. It is I who has the power now." He slowly bounced the fireball up and down, letting it distort slightly as it came in proximity with his skin. It spit sparks into the chill air as it swirled tightly in a ball about the size of an apple.

He cupped his hands together again and violet light shone through his skin until the fireball faded away. He spread his empty hands apart in supplication. "Surely you will not refuse the help of a god."

The baron sat forward in his chair. His eyes narrowed and his nose wrinkled as he stared at Sulrad. "How would you help me, you and your god?" The baron moved his hand to the hilt of his sword as he spoke. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because you have no other choice," Sulrad argued. "Have I not demonstrated that I am here because I choose to be here, not because of your chains or your guards."

"I've had enough of your talk." The baron nodded to the guards. "Take him to the stocks for the day. I'll decide later if we hang him, take his head, or let him go. He can enjoy the hospitality of the townsfolk while I'm deciding."

The guards flanked Sulrad, and he stretched his arms wide, turning both palms up. *Incendio ignius*. Immediately, twin fireballs appeared, twisting, turning, and sputtering in his hands.

One of the guards took a hesitant step toward him. Sulrad tossed the fireball gently into the air, sending it floating slowly toward the guard, who immediately backed away.

"I think I've had enough of this myself," Sulrad said. "Are you willing to allow me to serve you, or do you wish me to bring the power of Ran to bear against you?"

The baron raised his hand. "I could have you shot where you stand." He nodded at the archers that flanked the room.

"You could try. It would only serve to demonstrate the power of Ran. Please go ahead." Sulrad bounced one of the fireballs lazily up and down on his palm.

The baron waved his assent to the archers, who let fly.

The arrows streaked out. Sulrad reached for his magic. He formed twin fireballs and sent one at each arrow. Halfway across the room, both arrows burst into flames and vanished into small clouds of ash.

That was enough.

"Stop this nonsense." The baron stood and extended his hand toward Sulrad. "Clearly, you have power, but there are more ways than one to kill a wizard. Why should I allow you to live?"

Sulrad approached the throne, took to his knee in supplication, and bowed deeply. He'd thought this over while sitting in the gaol. The baron hated wizards but might accept him as a priest. A priest of Ran. That was how he would escape the baron's wrath. It would allow the baron to save face for allowing a wizard to live, and maybe, if Ran were merciful, allow Sulrad to continue serving him.

"I am a healer. A priest," he said. "I have been healing your folk here in Frostan for several moons. All I desire is to continue to bring the beneficence of Ran to the people. That and a place of worship where the faithful can gather."

"If I recognize your god and grant you liberty to practice your religion in my land, then you will what? Heal the peasants?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Nothing more?"

The girl beside him was eyeing Sulrad as if trying to see inside him. The tiniest touch of magic wafted its way from her. He gave her a taste of his own magic, sending a tendril back to her with a touch of the power he had accumulated over the last moon.

"Nothing more, My Lord," he said, turning his thoughts back to the baron.

"Rise then ... What is your name, wizard?"

"My Lord, I am called Sulrad."

"Well, Sulrad. If you can do as you say, I will grant you the freedom you request of me, but first you must prove yourself."

"How, My Lord?"

"I will not speak of it now," the baron said. "But soon I will call on you, and then I will let you know the true price of your freedom."



The next morning, Sulrad and Ignal dined at her palatial estate. He had bathed and donned a new black robe at her insistence. She said that it was the antithesis of wizardry and would show off his status. The black wool was trimmed with gold piping that accented the lines of the robe. It was more ostentatious than Sulrad would have liked, but with no small clothes beneath it, he was strictly following his code. One layer of clothes. If that layer was rich and ornate, so be it. Ageg would have laughed at his rationalization.

"Where is Ageg?" he asked. "Have I been in the goal so long that she has abandoned me?"

"Not long after you were thrown in the gaol, she came to me and told me that she feared she was next. She was quite worried."

"What did you tell her? You have such a way with words."

"I told her that Ran would protect her as he protected you, but she was not to be dissuaded. She was shaking when she came to me. Poor soul. I asked her where she might go, and she told me of her son and his get, and how she had not seen them in summers and missed them so."

"Where are they? We should send for her, tell her it's safe."

"They are very far away. And for safety's sake, I asked her not to tell me where she was going."

"Someone must know. It must have cost a fortune. I wasn't aware she had that much coin."

"I might have given her some," Ignal said.

"She is truly gone?"

"So it seems."

Sulrad felt the pain of losing another who had once loved him. He was certain of that. She had loved him as his own mother had not. Ageg had become more than the old healer he worked with. She was his guide to Frostan. His conscience. His reminder that he was only a man no matter how much power he had. It pained him to think she cared so little for him that she would run off at the slightest sign of trouble. Why did everyone in his life abandon him? Who would be his conscience now that she was gone?

"You should shave your head," Ignal interrupted his thoughts. "It will make you look wise."

"It will make me look old." He stabbed another slice of melon. It was sweet and flavorful. Under his tutelage, Ignal had learned not to offer him meat, then ceased to eat it herself. She was almost as devoted to Ran as he was.

"You will look wise," she said.

"Not yet. I still have to prove myself to the baron. He has a task for me before he grants me my complete freedom. But what if it's something I cannot do? What then?"

"You're a powerful wizard. You'll think of something."

"And if I can't do as he asks?"

"You can," Ignal purred. "Now tell me about how the baron will support our worship of Ran."

"He has agreed to allow me to pursue my religion. That is all he has agreed to at the moment. When I am successful at the task he will set for me, only then can I build a temple to honor Ran."

"A temple? How grand. I can see it now. A great steeple rising into the sky to catch the rays of the morning and

evening sun. It will be topped with a spear that throws Ran's glory back at all who see it. None will be able to deny his power."

"A grand temple? For Ran?" Sulrad asked.

"Yes. He is all powerful. He is all knowing. He deserves the best dwelling in the city. Would that we could outshine the castle."

"I had more of a small hut in mind," Sulrad said. "I don't expect too many followers to assemble there."

"You think too small. Imagine it. A grand structure, sweeping arches. A huge room where the faithful can gather, and in back, private rooms for the priests."

"So we already have priests?" Sulrad asked.

"And priestesses," Ignal replied. "Don't forget priestesses. Did you not say the baron's own daughter has magic? Petition him to allow you to train her. She would make a fine priestess. Teach her the healing arts. Send her out to the people. She will bring in golds by the stack."

"It's not about the golds," Sulrad said.

"Oh, my dear. How can you say such a thing? It's always about the golds, and with my connections and your magic, we will make so many golds that we will have to build a strong room in this nice new temple simply to hold them all."

"I'm not certain that is what Ran would want."

"Don't concern yourself about such things. I will take care of them. You just preach, heal, and do whatever the baron asks of you." Ignal jumped up from her seat. "Tell me about the girl. Is she really a wizard?"

"Sorceress. Her magic is different from mine, but she has the power. I felt her questing toward me while the baron was interrogating me. You are right. I will ask the baron to allow me to train her. She fascinates me. Did I ever tell you that she is the first one I ever saw using my magic?"

"Pray, do tell me, and don't leave anything out." Ignal settled in on the floor beside Sulrad, her face filled with

excitement.

A MODEST REQUEST

SULRAD

Sulrad was settling into his new role as a healer and part-time preacher. He healed those he could and brought the word of Ran to them. He missed Ageg and her help, but he'd found a new confidant in Ignal. With her help, he refined both his healing techniques and his words. He was amassing a shameful amount of gold, which he used to further the cause of Ran, purchasing food for the poor and rare herbs and plants to help in his healing. The only thing that bothered him was Rotiaqua. Try as he might, he was not able to contact her with his magic. He'd expected it would be easy now that the castle's protective ring of sky iron was gone, but it was not. It was as if she no longer existed, yet there was a subtle hint that she was there, hiding behind some new shield he had yet to pierce. Whenever his imagination drew close to the castle, it was as if a great tangle of briars had arisen to block his path. The spell had a familiarity to it. It was based on the one he had taught her, but there was more. She had been learning from someone. Was that why she had shunned him?

He'd tried to get to see the baron several times, hoping she would be there, but so far, he had been refused. It came as a surprise when, one evening, he received a summons to the baron's table.

He dressed in his finest clothes and washed himself in preparation for the meal. When the time came, he was admitted into the baron's private dining chamber, where he found both the baron and his daughter. When he looked at her, she turned her eyes away.

"Baron Reik," he said. "Rotiaqua. Nice to see you both again."

"Please take a seat. This is not a social call. It's business." The baron waved to the empty chair across from him.

"Does the baron require healing?" Sulrad glanced over at Rotiaqua. "It's not your lovely daughter, I hope."

"No. Nothing like that." The baron glanced around the room. "I have a task for you. One which must remain out of the public eye."

Out of the public eye. That didn't sound good.

"The king and I have been having a bit of a feud as of late. He's been burning fields and putting the small folk to the sword. I thought I had quelled it last summer, but it's started up again. He's attacking towns on the border."

"How do you wish me to help? Heal your troops? It's not likely that I can do much more than your own healers."

"You possess magic," the baron said.

Sulrad remained silent. No reason to argue or confirm.

"I want you to use your magic to deal with the king's men. Stop them before they burn and kill again."

"But, sire. I'm no war wizard."

"You've been trained in magic. I've learned that you spend several summers in Amedon under the tutelage of the wizards there."

Sulrad glanced at Rotiaqua. "That's true, but I am far from versed in warfare. Particularly warfare waged with magic."

The baron waved away his words. "No need for training. The king has no more use for wizards than I. He doesn't use

them. You will face troops, but not a wizard. I'm counting on you. You and your god Ran."

"Sire. Ran is a god of mercy and healing. He does not wage war."

"He will. If you wish to remain a free man."

"But. Sire."

"No but. You will do as I say. And to make sure you do as I ask, I will send Rotiaqua along as a witness. She will see that you carry out my orders and report to me."

"Father." Rotiaqua had sat silent throughout the meal. "Don't make me go with this fraud."

"Fraud? You saw what he did only a few days ago. He defeated arrows and chains. He's no fraud, and you will do as I say. You will accompany him and bring back word of what he does."

"Do you not fear for my life?" she asked.

"I'll send guards. They are to protect you, but not to engage with the king's men." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Understand? I don't want word of my troops getting into a fight with the king's men. A wizard is a different matter. I can always claim he is a rogue, and that you were trying to stop him."

"I will not." Rotiaqua pushed her chair back and stood.

"You will."

"I will not." Rotiaqua stormed from the room, throwing Sulrad a glance that would have curdled milk.

"She will," the baron said. "She gets a bit argumentative at times, but she always does as she is told in the end."

"Sire. This is highly irregular. You are entrusting the care of your daughter into my hands and sending us into armed conflict. I don't have to tell you how bad things could get. I would die if something happened to her."

"Most certainly. You will die at my hands if she returns with so much as a scratch. But if you want to retain your freedom, you will do as I command."

With that, the baron stood and pushed back his own chair. "In the morning, then?" he asked.

Sulrad glared at him. "As you command."

What else was there to say?



Sulrad walked the streets from the castle to Ignal's home, wanting to take the time to gather his thoughts. The baron was up to something. He knew it. When he reached the home, he was let in by the servants and told to stay out of the salon. The mistress, they said, was in distress and wished to see no one until further notice.

He pushed past the servants to find Ignal weeping, head in hands.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Danthan," she blurted out.

"Has something happened to the boy?"

"He's gone."

"Gone. Where? Did something happen?"

"His father happened. That's what."

Sulrad sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulder. "I don't understand. His father?"

"That rodent said the boy is healed, so he's no longer an embarrassment to the family. He said Danthan can now take his place as the heir to the business. Said it was high time the boy started learning the ropes." She sniffed back tears. "He took the boy. Without even bothering to tell me. They departed on a ship this morning. I was only barely given word before they weighed anchor and set the sails. My precious baby stood on the stern weeping for his mother as the ship left the harbor."

"I can't imagine how that pains you," Sulrad said. He was at a loss for words. What did one say to a mother who had lost a child, especially one as devoted as Ignal?

"I'll make him pay. He can't do this to me." She leaped from the chair, strolled across the room, and opened a drawer. From within she withdrew a knife much like the one Sulrad wore.

"Is that what I think it is?" he asked.

"Wizards steel?" She fingered the blade.

"Sky iron," he said. "It's precious and expensive."

"And it has magic," she said. "I will find him and spill his blood. Mark my words. He will not get away with this."

Sulrad waited. He'd seen her rage before, but never quite like this. He'd learned. With Merten. It was better to wait, so he stood there silent. Eventually, she quieted down and tucked the knife into her belt. "Enough about me. How was your dinner with the baron? Learn anything useful?"

"I think he means to trick me. He has asked me to use magic against the king's men, and he wants his daughter to escort me and bear witness."

"The girl. The one you saw in the fire?"

"The same."

"Does her father know she is a wizard?"

"I doubt it. She spoke often of her fear that he would discover her secret often. She believes if he learns what she is, he will put her to the flame."

"I see. You do have a dilemma on your hands. Let's discuss what might happen. It's possible that you will stop the king's troops and she will bear an honest witness. In that case, you will gain favor with the baron and his daughter. That would be a good thing. Having favor with the baron will help us greatly."

"Let us hope that is what transpires." Even as Sulrad spoke the words, he felt the wrongness of them. His guts twisted.

"If you were killed attempting to defeat the king's men, there is nothing to discuss, is there?"

"Not for me," Sulrad said. "Would you avenge my death?"

"Let's not think on that," Ignal said. "What if the baron's daughter were killed, and you survived? What then?"

"He would most surely blame me for it. He would hang me or burn me, so how is that better than my being killed in the fight?"

"Precisely. That's why you need to protect her at all costs. Make sure nothing befalls her. Not a saddle sore. Not a skinned knee. Not so much as a scratch."

"How do you propose I do that?"

"You have shields. Have you not described them to me?"

"Yes. They shield my magic from advertising what I am doing. I've never used them to shield myself against a weapon, much less another."

Ignal drew her knife and lunged at Sulrad. "Shields. Now."

He barely had time to think. "Cignite mae," he called out.

Magic welled forth from his chest, forming a shimmering shield before him with barely a half a heartbeat to spare as the shining sky iron knife flashed toward his chest.

The blade turned away, and with it, Ignal's arm.

"Again." She launched another attack at him, this time from the side.

He reacted too slow. The knife caught the sleeve of his robe and sliced it open even as his shield formed in the air beside him.

"An arrow now," Ignal shouted, throwing the knife at him from where she had landed.

He raised his hand and pushed his magic at the knife.

It clattered to the floor.

"I think you have the idea," Ignal said. "On the morrow, you must keep one eye on the baron's daughter and one on your target. Do not let anything befall her. It's vital that you secure the baron's approval."

"Ignal. You amaze me. I would not have thought you had it in you to attack another. You have so much compassion. It's so unlike you. Where did all that anger come from?"

“I imagined you were my bond-mate. After that, it was simple.”

Sulrad stared at her for the longest time. Such an unusual woman. So full of compassion and anger at the same time. Her feelings ran deep. Deeper than he could ever imagine. She ran hot and cold and switched between them, seemingly without pause.

He only hoped he never got on the wrong side of her.

WAR WIZARD

SULRAD

Sulrad woke early the next morning to spend time in quiet contemplation. That day had arrived where he was to demonstrate his loyalty and commitment to the baron. He was to take a small cadre of troops and confront the king's men. Failure meant a return to the gaol and worse. Why had he let himself be talked into such a thing? He had no military experience, not with troops. He had no idea where to begin. He fingered the statue of Ran at his throat.

"I'm counting on you."

As it always did when he needed it the most, the statue remained cold and silent.

He fetched the crystals he had recovered from the crater and checked to see that they were glowing brightly. They stored magic just as he did. When he drew on them, they grew less bright. If he drew too much magic from them, they went dark. There was a limit to how much magic they stored, so he used them sparingly, but on a day like today, they might be all that stood between success and failure. He pocketed them and rose, his meditation complete.

It was time to prepare his mind for battle.

He forewent the morning meal and spent more time bathing and preparing himself than he usually did, letting

his thoughts wander. The baron had promised to send his daughter with him as a witness. Was it because the baron secretly knew his daughter had magic and he wished to see what Sulrad's influence on her would reveal?

She had given him a warm welcome back then, but not recently. Still, he had hope. Hope that this trip would give him time to get to know her better. Discover if she was an agent of Amedon or still free. Perhaps they had overlooked her being a sorceress. If so, would she be an ally or an enemy? There was so much he needed to learn. So much at stake.

After his meditation, he requisitioned a few men and set out to find the king's soldiers, the baron's daughter riding silently beside him the whole morning.

He had tried to engage her in various subjects but was met with only grunts in response, or even worse, total silence. It was only when he began extolling the virtues of Ran that she engaged in conversation.

Rotiaqua guided her horse around a pothole in the road. "So far, I am not impressed by anything Ran has done," Rotiaqua said. "It looks like little more than wizardry to me."

"Ran is subtle and powerful." Sulrad held her in his gaze. "Do you want me to teach you?"

"Teach me what?" she asked.

"How to access Ran's power. You have the gift. You are a wizard. Let us not pretend otherwise."

She glanced around as if to see who might be listening. "I have no magic." Her words were stern, but there was a waver in her voice that told him she was not as confident as she seemed.

"You saw me," he said. "In the fire. When we were just children. I remember you."

"You must be mistaken." She spurred her horse onwards and was soon lost in the dust ahead.

No matter. She had magic. She was curious. Eventually, she'd break down and ask for his help.

In the morning, Sulrad prepared for his first battle. His hands shook when he poured his morning tea, and he shoved them into his pockets before anyone could see them. He had never faced down an army of men alone. There were so many things that could go wrong. What if they had a wizard with them? What if they had sky iron blades?

Sulrad paused, recalling his plan to protect her. He would shield her as he shielded himself.

He constructed a web of magic and cast it toward her, but it vanished. It was as if she was already protected. Protected by magic stronger than his own. How could that be? Was she already an agent of Amedon? Had they gotten to her? How could they have done that with her in the castle and its protective sky iron in place? Had this just happened? Was that why she had been unreachable by him?

He worried about it, but he could not let it deter him. He was about to ride out in preparation for what would be the most frightening day of his life. The town lay just over a low hill. It appeared peaceful enough. Nestled along an expanse of golden grain, the town was little more than a collection of cots and hovels not much different from the place Sulrad had been born. He imagined himself still living there. If the magic had not come awake in him, that would have been his lot. Grubbing for leftovers off the land of some wealthy and unseen lord that cared little for his welfare, but the baron had sent him out to protect this town. Was the baron showing beneficence toward his small folk, or was it just another set piece in the grand game of politics the royals spent so much of their time in?

A thread of smoke rose from one of the cots, white and wispy. A hearth. Not a burning building. The king's men had not arrived. Perhaps they would not. As he watched, the folk of the town spilled from their cots and hovels and took up

their labors in the fields. Like ants from the hill, a line of men trod the narrow dirt road to the nearest field and began swinging their scythes. Silver blades flashing in the sun as they rose and fell, sheaves of golden grain falling in neat rows before them. It was calming to watch, even with the threat of the king's men. Sulrad almost missed his days in the field, but truth be told, he preferred the city life. It was noisy and filled with people, but it gave him a sense of purpose to be a servant of Ran to so many.

His reverie was interrupted by one of the baron's men. "Here they come," he called out.

Down the road, a thin brown cloud rose into the morning air, dissipating almost as quickly as it appeared. Ten, maybe more riders. There was a lot of dust. Things were about to get exciting. "Warn the farmers." Sulrad mounted his horse. "One of you go get Rotiaqua," he added. "She's supposed to be a witness. Let's not leave her asleep while I demonstrate the power of Ran."

The man nodded even as the first one raised a horn to his lips and blew.

The farmers ceased their labor, looking for the source of the sound as they gathered together. When they noticed the dust cloud, they ceased their labor and gathered in a clump alongside the road waiting to see what happened.

Before long, a dozen men crested the rise emerging from the dust. The lead horse carried a banner showing the king's colors. To a man, the rest were dressed in armor and had their swords in hand.

The battle had begun.

Sulrad spurred his horse on down the hill past the knot of farmers.

He called out as he passed them, "Ran will protect you."

He reined up his horse and waited in the middle of the dusty road, arm outstretched to halt the advancing army.

The lead horse pulled over to the side and let the first soldier pass. The man halted his horse in front to Sulrad,

sword held at the ready, pausing as two of his men took up stations, one at each side.

"In the name of Ran, I order you to stop and leave this land," Sulrad shouted.

The soldier raised his visor, showing a dark face clean shaven and smiling. "In whose name?"

Sulrad raised his hand and gathered his power to him. He needed to be ready for anything. "In the name of Ran, on behalf of Baron Reik, I command you to leave this land and its people and return to your king."

"I don't know no Ran." The soldier pulled his sword from its scabbard and held it high. "In the name of King Omrik, I command you to step aside or be run through where you stand. We are meting out the just punishment that the king has decreed."

The soldier walked his horse forward.

"I am warning you. Leave now, while you still can, or face the wrath of Ran." Sulrad held out his hand. "Incendio ignius," he whispered. A fireball materialized, floating just above his outstretched palm. His horse tensed up, ears twitching. The last thing he needed was for the animal to bolt when he was trying to appear threatening. He clamped his legs tight and sent a thin thread of magic toward the animal to reassure it before turning his attention back to the task at hand. The fireball turned a deep violet, spinning and spitting sparks, growing brighter and brighter until Sulrad had to look away.

It was working. The lead soldier lowered his visor, then turned his head away.

Would it be enough? Was that all it would take? A little magic and the king's men would turn away? He drew a deep breath, glanced back at Rotiaqua sitting astride her horse, watching. Let her tell the baron how Sulrad had frightened off the king's men with just a word. "Be gone," he shouted.

The lead soldier spurred his horse and raised his sword.

Sulrad raised a fireball. Not the impressive one he had hoped for, but a hastily constructed ball of fire that barely covered his palm.

No time to try for more. The rider was almost upon him.

He pressed his magic into the fireball and released it.

The fireball emitted a single shaft of light as if he were a lamp or a lantern. The light struck the lead soldier gathered around him, extending outward to engulf the two men beside him. For a moment, the three men froze.

Enough. They wouldn't remain still for long.

Sulrad loosed the fire. It followed the violet beam to the men, igniting everything in its path. The soldiers, the horses, their equipment. Everything vanished in a bright sparkle of light. A cloud of ash quickly floated away on the breeze.

Sulrad drew a breath.

It was over.

The king's men had been defeated.

He let the fireball extinguish and lowered his arms.

As if that were a signal, another horseman raised his sword and charged. He flashed through the dissipating cloud of ash that had been his comrade as he bore down on Sulrad.

The soldier swung his sword.

Sulrad pulled back, but not fast enough. The blade slashed his arm.

Fire erupted from the wound.

Sulrad gathered his magic to himself once more, but it was weakening.

The soldier was turning for a second pass.

He had to think of something.

Sulrad drew on the crystals, directing their power into a new fireball that sprang into existence at his words.

"Again," he said.

The charging soldier vanished in a ball of fire.

Sulrad turned to the remaining men.

"Anyone else?" he demanded.

The staff bearing the king's colors dipped. The man carrying it turned and left without a word. One by one, the men threw Sulrad a menacing glance, then turned and followed the standard bearer as he headed away.

"Well, at least my father will be pleased," Rotiaqua said.

Sulrad started. He had forgotten all about her in the heat of the battle. The girl had ridden close and now approached Sulrad on horseback.

"Ran is merciful and vengeful. Today he has shown his mercy by leaving some alive."

"Please. No more Ran."

Sulrad turned to the villagers and raised his voice. What better time than now to spread the word of Ran and his mercy. Perhaps he could start something here in this small town. These people were indebted now. He could use that. "Today, you have seen the power of Ran. Worship him and he will protect you."

The farm hands whispered amongst themselves, then bowed. "Thank you, Mighty One, for saving us," one of them called out.

"Don't thank me," he said. "Thank Ran. Remember him and he will remember you."

An older woman rushed to his aid tearing the kerchief from her head to make a binding for his arm. Blood dripped from the wound, rich red droplets rolling off his arm and shoulder to stain the ground. Despite the woman's efforts to tie the kerchief fast, it did little to staunch the flow of blood. Sulrad was growing light-headed.

Rotiaqua pushed her way through the throng, took one look at the dirty kerchief, and huffed, "Don't you know anything about wound care?"

"I was only trying to help, ma'am."

"That's filthy, and it's tied too tight," Rotiaqua said. "You've cut off the blood flow to his arm. The limb will die

and he'll be worse off than before." She yanked at the kerchief. "Do you have any salt?"

"Only a tiny bit, mistress," the woman stammered, backing away.

"Go to our men. Ask them for salt." Rotiaqua picked at the kerchief, but the knot was tight.

"My hand has gone numb," Sulrad said. "Use your magic. Heal me."

"I don't have magic." She drew her knife and pressed the point against the knot.

"We've seen each other in the fire. Use your magic."

Rotiaqua glanced at the faces surrounding them, raised her voice, and said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I have no magic."

She grasped the knot and gave her knife a shove.

It slipped.

The blade slashed through her palm, opening a deep wound.

"Now you're hurt." Sulrad felt her blood drip onto his arm. As it did, he sensed magic. Not just hers, but something more. She was like him. She'd taken the magic of another, something much more powerful than a mere field animal. Was it a wizard she had sacrificed? He knew of no animal that carried that much power, but it did not feel like a person. There were no memories in the power. No hint of who the magic had come from.

"Curse all the gods," Rotiaqua said. "Would you shut your mouth? You're distracting me."

"Why do you treat me so?" Sulrad asked. "I thought we were friends."

"We were. But that was before."

"Before what?"

"Before I learned what you are."

"What am I?"

"An abomination. Do you think I can't tell?"

Sulrad was shocked. What had she sensed? That he had taken the magic of another? Was she able to sense that about him? But she had the magic of another in her. Did she think he could not sense that?

"I'm no different from you," he said.

"My magic is pure."

Rotiaqua sliced at the kerchief once more. This time, it came loose. She yanked it free.

Blood spurted from Sulrad's wound.

"Use your magic."

"Use your own magic." Rotiaqua placed her palm over the sword wound and pressed.

The flow of blood slowed.

She pressed harder.

The blood stopped.

A burst of memories filled Sulrad. Memories of a childhood on a distant estate. Of a young girl raised by a handmaiden instead of a mother. How she had been summoned to court to fulfill an obligation to a father she barely knew. And beneath it all was a reflection of his own childhood. The abuse at the hands of a father who cared for nothing but his god and a mother who had abandoned him when he needed her the most.

"Heal me," he said. "Say these words. 'Novi facts, ut fiat in carne.'"

"I have no magic."

"You can't hide it from me." Sulrad jutted his chin at the farmers crowding around them. "They won't know."

"If my father gets word of this, he will burn me at the stake."

"He won't. Say the words."

Rotiaqua increased the pressure on his wound. "Novi facts, ut fiat in carne," she said, with nearly a perfect accent. "Et nisi hoc indignum," she added.

Sulrad's arm erupted with an itch that bordered on intolerable. "More," he said.

“Novi facts, ut fiat in carne,” Rotiaqua repeated.

This time, the flesh of Sulrad’s arm drew slowly together, the blood slowing as it did. In half a hand of heartbeats, the bleeding had stopped and all that remained was an angry red scar.

Rotiaqua withdrew her hand and held it out, palm toward him.

“Now you.”

Sulrad stretched his hand out, palm against hers. “Let the power of Ran heal this woman.”

He released his power into her, seeking the source of her foreign magic, but she shut him out.

“Keep your thoughts to yourself,” she muttered.

“Ran has accepted your petition. He will heal you,” Sulrad raised his voice so the farmers could hear him, then whispered the words to the spell he had given Rotiaqua.

Her flesh drew closed just as his had. Her bleeding stopped just as his had.

He grasped her hand and displayed it to the gathered farmers. “See the power of Ran? He has saved you, and he has healed me. Would you welcome one such as this into your homes? Your hearts?”

SHAVEN

SULRAD

The ride back to Frostan was dusty, and with the noise of the horses' hooves on the road, there was no opportunity for conversation. Rotiaqua rode with Sulrad, but she remained aloof and ran her horse almost to the point of being reckless. When they reached the town, she rushed off without a word. Sulrad wanted to confront the baron as soon as possible, but decided against it. What would the baron think of him? He had been on the road for several days. His hair was greasy, his face dirty, and his clothes smelled of horse and ashes.

He decided to beg a wet cloth from Ignal to wash away the dirt.

She fussed over him, summoning servants to draw a bath, but he declined.

"I need to see the baron."

"You're not going in there looking like that," Ignal scolded. "You have time to clean up a bit."

"I have no time. The baron needs to hear this from me before anyone else gets a chance to tell their own tale."

"You're not going to represent Ran looking like a hog farmer. We're going to get you presentable. It won't take but a moment." She tugged at his shirt. "This stinks."

"It's all I have."

"I already thought of that." Ignal gestured to the rich black robe she had made for him. It was ostentatious, but at least it was clean.

"Sit down while I take care of your hair."

"I don't have time to wash my hair before I see the baron."

Ignal drew a razor from her pocket. "I didn't plan to wash it. You don't have time for that, and I truly want to see the shape of your head."

"I said no. I don't want my head shaved."

"Your hair stinks like the backside of a horse. Trust me, this will improve your life." She held up the razor. "If you don't like it, let it grow back, but I know you will come to love it."

"Fine, but hurry. The baron needs to hear from me first."

"Lean back." Ignal poured water over his hair and rubbed in a soft soap, deftly removing the hair with the razor. In no time at all, she was patting his head with the towel. "There. It's much better. Now strip off those dirty clothes and let's get you washed up."

He paused, his gaze fixed on hers. Did she expect him to disrobe before her? Why did she treat him like this? He thought she was an adherent of Ran, but this felt like more. As if she thought he was the god, not Ran. The thought gave him pause. What was he doing? Was he preparing her to serve Ran or himself? He'd need to decide, and soon. The woman was fanatical, and once she made up her mind, there was little chance of changing it.

"What are you waiting for? Think you have something I haven't seen before?" She wriggled her little finger in the air. "You have nothing to fear from me."

Sulrad let her wash him. She had a gentle hand but was firm where she needed to be. Soon he was clean and shaved. She anointed his head and face with an oil that smelled vaguely of lavender.

"There you go. Now you're presentable." She climbed up on the jake and gave his bald head a kiss. "For luck."

"Come. Let's see the baron." Ignal took his hand and guided him through the streets and to the baron's audience chamber, shooing away any who dared stand in her way.

"I'm to see the baron," Sulrad said when they reached the door.

"Not yet." The guard stepped in front of the door. "The baron is busy."

"Tell him Sulrad is here with news of his victory."

"I'm certain he will be pleased to hear it as soon as he is available."

"Do you know who I am?" Sulrad asked. He was growing impatient. Just what was the baron doing that he had no time to listen?

"Come. Sit. Tell me about it." Ignal pulled at his hand, guiding him to a bench beside the door. "I'm eager to hear everything."

"There is not much to tell. We found the village and waited. The king's men came riding up. I confronted them and told them to turn back. I had to burn a few to ash before they listened, but they did and they left."

"You turned them to ash?"

"Yes. I had no choice. They would have killed me otherwise."

"Ran bless you. You did what you had to."

"I wish I hadn't needed to."

"You are without sin. Ran bless you. You are his voice. You can't sin." She smiled at him, her eyes afire. "And the villagers, did they see Ran's power?"

"They did."

"Are they believers? Did they accept his will?"

"They expressed their gratitude."

"How grateful?" Ignal asked.

"They bowed down to the ground in thanks."

"No gold? No silver?"

"None."

"Not even a copper?"

"No. Not one."

"How then are we to build the temple for Ran? How will we show off his power to the whole land?"

He shrugged.

"Wealth first," she said. "Help the wealthy. They have coin. You can't help everyone, so help those who can help you in return. Doesn't that seem only fair?"

"I do not believe Ran distinguishes between rich and poor. He is more concerned with a person's heart than their purse."

"But. We need gold to build a temple. Why not first help those with wealth? Then, when the temple is built, and we are staffed with priests and priestesses, we can heal the poor? Serving the wealthy first will bring in the gold. We will help the poor, but later, after we have golds."

He pondered her words. Accumulating wealth was a sin. Those with coin needed Ran no less than those without. Helping them would not only bring in the coin needed to serve those without it, but it would help reduce the burden on the wealthy by removing some of that wealth. So long as he did not spend the golds on himself, he wasn't sinning, was he?

He imagined the temple she described. Would it really bring in worshipers? Was that what Ran had in mind for him? He tried to envision it. A temple built of stone with a spire reaching into the sky, visible for leagues. It was an intriguing idea. He let his imagination run with it. Priests in black robes. Acolytes in blue. The faithful thronging to worship Ran. No longer would Ran be a minor god, worshiped only by a few scattered farmers. Ran would be known across the land, and he, Sulrad, would be the voice of Ran. He would bring Ran's words to the land and bring Ran's blessing to everyone rich and poor alike.

To think it all started with a piece of sky iron falling to earth on the land he toiled upon. Truly Ran had chosen him. How could he argue with that?

He glanced at Ignal. At some point while she was talking, she had taken his hand in hers. At first, he thought to shake it off. Was that the sort of relationship he wanted, or was there something he could do? She was a strong and resourceful woman and brushing off her advances could lead to no good. Perhaps there was something more he could do.

"Ignal?"

She turned to gaze into his eyes.

"I have something to tell you."

"I'm listening."

He clasped her hand even tighter. "Listen to the sound of my voice. Not my words, but the sound of my voice. The sound of my voice is enthralling. It is enchanting. There is nothing in this world you wish for but to sit still and listen to the sound of my voice."

Her eyes fluttered as if she were struggling to keep them open.

"Listen to the sound of my voice. You love to listen to the sound of my voice as I tell you of the wonders of Ran. You realize that it is not my voice that you find so fascinating, but that I speak with the voice of Ran. Ran is all. Ran is mercy. Ran is goodness, and I am his humble priest, his voice."

Her hand relaxed in his, but he did not let it go.

"Ran is everything. Ran is all." He let the tiniest bit of magic flow from him through her and out into the wild. No spell, just magic. He wanted to see what would happen. Would it enhance the mesmerizing words he spoke, or would it simply flow through her and out into the wild to be reclaimed later?

A smile crossed her lips.

She moaned softly.

Her breathing quickened.

Sulrad flinched. Perhaps he'd gone a bit too far. He pulled back, fearful for what he had done to her. This certainly wasn't what he expected. But what had she experienced?

"Ignal, what happened just now?"

"Didn't you feel it? Ran touched me. I felt his presence, and it was ecstatic." Her eyes were glazed over, but her breathing had returned to normal. He knew some of that feeling. He had experienced it himself when taking the magic from one of the wizards who had attacked him. He wondered if he could do the same to someone else. Maybe the baron's daughter. It was something to think about.

"The baron will see you now." The guard interrupted his reverie.

Sulrad stood and looked down at Ignal. Her smile broadened, but she remained sitting, eyes focused straight ahead.

"Guess I'll go in by myself," he said.

HEALING

SULRAD

Sulrad stepped into the audience chamber filled with petitioners to find the baron just finishing his evening meal, the remnants of which were being carried out as he entered. Meat, thick gravy, roasted vegetables, and pies in various partially eaten states lay on a large silver platter. The baron had a streak of brown sauce on his lip that was wiped away by a maid. He belched and settled back in his chair, ignoring the crowd of people waiting to please for his mercy.

"Go fetch my daughter," the baron told his page. "Tell her to come immediately. I don't care what she is doing. I want her down here now."

The page bowed and rushed from the room. "Right away, sire."

"So, priest, tell me of your adventure," the Baron said.

"We met the king's forces near a village on the border. They were mounted men with swords. They rode up the road to menace the townsfolk who were doing nothing but toiling at their labor." Sulrad paused to collect his thoughts.

The door burst open, and in walked a wet Rotiaqua. She wore only a large beige towel wrapped around her.

The baron frowned at her.

She shrugged. "You said immediately. I wouldn't think of making you wait when such a summons is issued." She sat on her chair beside the baron, water dripping from her hair and onto the rich velvet upholstery. It trickled down to the floor where it made a small pool beneath her.

"You were with the priest." The baron nodded toward Sulrad. "Did you witness the power of Ran he speaks of?"

She glanced at Sulrad before she spoke. "I don't know whose power he used, but I did witness him vaporize a number of soldiers and drive the rest of the men off before they could put the farmers to the sword or burn their crops."

Turning to Sulrad, she said, "I'm sorry. Why have you shaved your head and what are you wearing?"

Sulrad was taken aback. What business was it of hers how he dressed? Ignal had proclaimed that the robes and shaved head made him look distinguished, but Rotiaqua seemed to think it was some sort of a jest. Something to be made fun of, but it was not. He was a priest of Ran. The voice of a god. It was why he had been born where he had. It was why he had been raised the way he was. It was his reason for being. To serve Ran. To be his voice. He was not like other men. He was special.

"These are to mark me as a Priest of Ran," he said. "I have taken an oath to serve Ran for the rest of my life. No other shall have a place in my heart, no woman and no children for me. I am a Priest of Ran. I have dedicated my life to him and to his worship. I exist only to serve him and guide others to his light."

As he spoke the words, the statue of Ran at his neck twitched. Ran liked what he had to say. He hadn't planned it any more than he had planned the words that he had uttered to first bring forth fire. They must have been sent to him. How else would he have come up with such a fervent declaration?

He cast a quick glance at Rotiaqua. She sat there, arms folded across her chest, hair dripping water to the dais, a scowl on her face. She made no secret about how she felt about him. He would have to work on that. She could be a great ally once she came around to his way of thinking, but there was time for that. At the moment, the baron was questioning him about his belief in Ran and how those duties would benefit the baronial holdings. Sulrad grasped at the question and responded with some of the ideas Ignal had raised. He would be a healer and a priest. He would serve the baron by bringing health to the baron's closest circle. That would endear him with the baron.

To cap his impassioned plea, Sulrad turned to the crowd waiting to petition the baron. He faced the line of petitioners, speaking in as deep a voice as he could muster. "Is there anyone who comes here seeking assistance? Perhaps for a sick or injured child?"

A woman raised her hand. "I do, sire. I have come asking for help for my son. He was run over by a wagon and his leg is twisted and broken."

The woman's ragged homespun dress was threadbare and dirty. Her hair was matted with straw. Sulrad recalled what Ignal had told him about golds, and how he should be helping the rich first. Was this the sort of person the baron would thank him for healing, or was she simply a bother? The woman was in need, but she had no coin to pay for a healing and certainly meant nothing to the baron. He needed someone with wealth, with connections to the baron. This was not the one. Not if Ignal's vision of the temple of Ran's was to become a reality. They would need gold, and this woman was not one who could provide those golds.

He walked along the line. "Anyone else?"

A merchant was waiting at the end of the line. His clothes were expertly tailored, his jewelry was of gold set with precious stones. He was fat. A glutton and a sinner. He

overindulged not only food, but in hoarding gold. The way he glanced at the baron said the two were close. Here was the perfect penitent to try out Ignal's plan.

Sulrad nodded at the man.

"My daughter," the man said. "She has weak eyes. She can't see and needs a guide to take her from place to place."

Sulrad nodded to the merchant. "Please take me to her. I will heal her."

The woman in the homespun dress grabbed at his arm as he passed. "But what about my son?"

Sulrad shook off her hand. He turned to the merchant and extended his arm. "I can't heal everyone."

"Please, kind sir," the woman begged. "Won't you heal my son? He won't be able to work with his leg all twisted up. How is he supposed to support a family?"

It pained him to turn her away. Sulrad cast his magic toward her, seeking information about her son. The woman's thoughts came into focus. The accident had happened some moons ago. The boy's bones were knitted in the wrong places. He was a cripple and would be that way for the rest of his life. Even if she were the right candidate, there was nothing he could do for the boy. He had no magic to restore the woman's son. It was too late. The sort of incantation needed to undo the damage would drain him for half a moon and prevent him from healing anyone else. There was nothing he could do, even if he wished it. But he could not admit that. To admit that would be saying Ran was somehow limited. Better to let her think Sulrad uncaring than to risk leaving even the smallest doubt as to Ran's might.

He faced the woman and spoke slowly as to a half-wit. "Then it's best that he not raise a family, if he cannot care for one."

The woman grabbed at his robe, but he pulled it away from her. His precious magic would be wasted on her. He

had made his choice, and she was getting in his way. "Leave me alone!"

He extended his arm to the merchant once more. "Let us see about your daughter."

Rotiaqua stood beside him with a furious look on her face. She had no idea how poor the boy's life would be, despite anything Sulrad could do for him. She breathed heavily as if preparing to admonish him.

Before she could speak, the baron rose and addressed her. "Go with him and witness what he does. Then come back and tell me about it."

Rotiaqua glanced down at the towel. "Like this?"

The baron laughed. "I didn't ask you to come down half dressed."

He waved toward Sulrad and the merchant. "Hurry up before you lose sight of them."



Sulrad looked over his shoulder and saw Rotiaqua rushing to catch up. She had managed to throw on pants and a shirt, but lacked shoes. She stepped gingerly on the uneven flagstones, as if unaccustomed to walking without shoes. She truly was soft and spoiled. He almost felt sorry for her.

"Here. This is my humble abode," the merchant said.

The humble abode was three times the size of Ignal's home. The entryway was decorated with fine portraits of the merchant and his family. The daughter was depicted in almost all of them in various stages of growth. She was chubby like her father and shared the same nose and chin, but thankfully had her mother's eyes.

The merchant escorted them into a sitting room where his bond-mate fawned over Rotiaqua while apologizing for the state of her preparations. Sulrad was certain that if he let her go on like that, she would waste the entire evening

groveling for Rotiaqua's attention, all thoughts of her own daughter lost to her desire to gain favor with the baron.

"Please bring the girl here." Sulrad motioned to a small divan near the interior courtyard.

The bond-mate snapped her fingers at the nearest servant. "My daughter!"

"Yes, ma'am." The servant bowed his head and backed out of the room. He returned shortly, leading a girl by the hand. She was barely ten summers in age by the look of her.

Sulrad held his hand up in front of her face. Just how blind was she? He reached out with his magic and created the ghost hand he had come to associate with his healing powers. He carefully examined her eyes. They were covered in a milky film but were otherwise healthy.

"Can you see my hand?" he asked.

"Yes, I can." Her voice was low and pleasant but wavered as if she lacked confidence.

Sulrad extended three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding out?" he asked.

The girl huffed. "Two ... three ... I don't know."

Sulrad passed his hand across the girl's face. "Et perspicuitati conduct et reditus." He called the magic to restore clarity to her vision. A slight violet glow appeared, wrapping the girl in its light.

Sulrad glanced at Rotiaqua. He was certain she sensed the magic. She was intrigued, but also repulsed by it. Why was that?

He pressed his magic into the girl, digging deep into his personal stores, repeating the incantation over and over again. It was hard work. Draining. The infirmity was old and deep-rooted. It fought him until he thought he had no more to give. Finally, he felt a snap, and the resistance was gone. The film coating her eyes disappeared. He had prevailed. The girl would see once more.

He held up his hand again. Three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

The girl's face broke out in a smile. "I see three. Father. I can see." The girl sprang from the couch and ran to her father. "I can see again."

The merchant removed the gold chain from around his neck and made a big show of extending it to Sulrad. It was heavy and inlaid with precious stones. He held it out, ready to place it around Sulrad's neck.

Sulrad backed away without thinking. All he could see was the symbol of the man's excess heading straight for him. What would happen if that declaration of sin touched the holy statue of Ran? Sulrad shuddered to think what sort of punishment he would earn by taking the gift, but then he remembered what Ignal had said. They needed gold. Relieving the merchant of his gold would also lighten the burden of sin the man carried. Sulrad could take the gold, just not wear it.

"No, I do not need any adornment beyond these simple robes," Sulrad said.

He took the necklace and placed it in his pocket. It was truly heavy. Ignal would be proud of him. The thought made him stop for a moment. Was this something to be truly proud of?

Yes. It was.

The temple of Ran had begun.

SCRIPTURE

SULRAD

Half a moon had passed since the skirmish with the troops and things were starting to quiet down in Sulrad's world. On this day, the sun rose quietly, shedding its light into Sulrad's quarters. Despite the coolness of the night, the day promised to be warm. The songs of the night birds had given way to a completely different chorus as the mourning doves woke and began their song. It was sad and lonely.

Sulrad reached for the mug of strong tea that had long ago gone cold. He sipped it, letting the bitter root bite his tongue. As it slid down his throat, the power of the potion infused him with its energy. He'd concocted the brew from special leaves brought from a foreign merchant who visited the port. The leaves were forbidden to all but those in the healing field due to their strong medicinal powers.

A rap sounded at his door. It could only be Ignal at this early hour. It was lately her habit to rise before the sun and see to the preparation of Sulrad's morning meal.

The door opened with a creak. "Fresh tea?" Ignal asked.

"Mhhh," Sulrad muttered without tearing his gaze away from the scroll before him.

Ignal removed his cold mug and replaced it with the fresh steaming one that emitted the aroma of anise.

"How's the writing progressing?" she asked.

"Slowly," he said. "I can't seem to get my thoughts straight."

She hopped up onto a stool beside him and scanned the scroll, her finger running along the characters as she read aloud. "Why do bad things happen to the faithful?" She turned to him. "Is this what has you all tied up in knots?"

"I just can't seem to understand. Take your own situation. Your son. You loved him. You cared for him. Why did Ran let your bond-mate take him away from you?"

"So I could care for you," she said.

"But your son. You thought I didn't notice. You were devastated. You couldn't focus. You cried when no one was listening, but now you take it all in stride. Why?"

"Because it is all for the best."

"Your bond-mate stole your child. Why didn't Ran stop that? You're as faithful as any."

She reached up and stroked the back of his neck. "You truly are struggling today. It's not just about my son, is it?"

Sulrad drew a breath. Should he tell her? She would find out even if he didn't. She always did. His mother had been on his mind as of late. What would she think of him now? He was a successful healer. Would she welcome him back? If she did, would it be because of his newfound wealth, his position? He wasn't sure he wanted to find out. He patted Ignal's hand. She always knew what to say. He could tell her.

"My mother," he said. "Why did Ran take her away from me? Why take your son? Why take anyone? If the faithful are not cared for, then what good is faith?"

Ignal jumped from her stool, taking his hand. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"Just come with me." She led him to the window of his bedchamber and pushed the shutters wide. The street below was nearly vacant, but here and there, vendors were

setting up to sell their wares. A small cluster of women made their way to the well with empty buckets, a cloud of children at their heels. Propped against one wall, an old man slept, his head bowed.

"Are all of these folk free to do as they please?" Ignal asked.

"One might say so."

"What if that one..." She jutted her chin at the old man. "... were to take out a knife and kill one of those women?"

"I doubt he would do such a thing." Sulrad wondered where she was going with this. Was she going to tell him that everyone was evil deep down at their core? He had never believed that. People were good, even those who occasionally did bad things.

"Could he?" she asked. "Should he choose to?"

"I don't see why that matters."

"Could he?" Ignal was insistent.

"I suppose he could." Again he wondered where this was going.

"What if the woman..." She jutted her chin to one of the woman with the pail. "... was one of the faithful and prayed to Ran to stop him?"

He imagined the old man rising from his rest and drawing out a long knife. The man attacked the woman who called out to Ran for mercy. In an ideal world, the attacker would be struck down by lightning for his crimes, but that was not what happened. Ran didn't work that way. He didn't interfere in matters such as that. That was the point of Sulrad's unease. "That's what I am struggling with," he said. "Why would Ran allow such a thing?"

"Let's say that Ran did intervene," Ignal lectured. "That he prevented the one with the knife from harming the one with the bucket. What then?"

"A great evil would have been averted."

"What about the man?"

"What about him?"

“Would he still have freedom to do as he pleases?” She raised an eyebrow at Sulrad and tapped her foot.

“Of course.”

“But Ran stopped him from doing evil. Is that freedom?”

“No. But it is good.”

“What of the man. Is he good or evil then?” she asked.

“Evil. He intended to harm the woman.”

“But he didn’t.”

“He wanted to.”

“But he didn’t,” she said. “He was stopped. So is he evil or good?”

Sulrad pondered her words. Without freedom to do as he pleased, the man would never demonstrate the true contents of his heart. It was his actions that showed his heart and stopping his actions would prevent his heart from being exposed, but Ran already knew what was in his heart. Why then let him carry out such an act of harm?

As if she had read his mind, Ignal said. “Everyone has evil thoughts. Not everyone acts on them. Ran allowed your mother to leave you, but he has since blessed you with a great honor. You are the keeper of his word. You are the one who brings his light to others. He took my son and blessed me with the freedom to serve. He has blessed us both by removing the obstacles that stood between us and his work. How could that be bad?”

“I suppose that’s true. It still feels like a bad thing.”

“Where Ran is concerned, nothing that serves him can be bad. How could it?”

“Indeed.” Sulrad paced the room, thinking. She had a point. How could something that resulted in so much good be inherently evil? The whole concept he had been struggling with came into focus as if by magic. He saw it now. It was all so clear. Even the argument he would use to persuade the skeptics came clear. He could do it. He must do it.

“Thank you for your words,” he said.

“Not my words.” Ignal reached out and touched the statue of Ran that hung around Sulrad’s neck.

It grew warm at her touch.

Ran was pleased.



Days later, Sulrad once again sat before his desk. He carefully placed the final symbol on the last scroll, returned the quill to the inkwell, and sat back. He was unshaven, the hair on his head growing to match that on his chin. He desperately needed to be shorn. And sleep. He needed sleep more than anything else.

He sat back, letting exhaustion overcome him.

He still had so much work to do. He must build a house for Ran. One that would gather the faithful together. It would be filled with learning, healing, and praise. He would teach the seekers. Those who came for healing or bread, but stayed to learn of Ran. He would teach the peasants to read. Give them copies of the scrolls he had just finished. Let them teach others until the whole land was brought to enlightenment.

The door creaked.

It was Ignal. Of course it was. Who else would intrude on him at such a time? The woman carried an ewer of steaming water. “You need a bath,” she said.

“And a shave.”

“And a shave.” She patted the bed. “Come sit. I’ll have you looking sharp again in no time.”

“Surely it’s not that bad?” Sulrad sniffed. He had become somewhat ripe. How long had it been since he had a proper bath? A proper meal? Half a moon? More?

Ignal set a small table beside the bed. She poured hot water into a bowl and dipped a towel into it.

The towel was soothing on his face.

"Let that work for a while." She fetched a brush and cup from the dresser, dipped the brush in the water, and swirled it in the cup for a hand of heartbeats, all the while humming a melody Sulrad had heard it before. It was the one she hummed when she was happy. He wondered what it was that made her happy this day.

"All right. That should do it." Ignal withdrew the cloth and lathered Sulrad's face. She strapped the razor and began.

"You finished your writing," she said as she worked.

"I have."

She placed a finger on his lips. "Don't talk."

Sulrad sat in silence as the razor glided over his flesh.

"I have hired a scribe to copy your scrolls. They will be distributed across the land so that all may know of Ran and his beneficence. I have already recruited a young girl with great patience and a facility with the written word. She has begun teaching the children of the faithful to read. She is very good. Soon they will begin studying Ran's words as you have transcribed them. Something bothers me, though. You seem to think that the temple will be a simple affair. A place for the few to gather."

Sulrad made to speak, but she shushed him.

"You think too small. Ran is all powerful. He would not live in a simple hovel. He needs something grand. Something that inspires awe in all who see it." She gestured in the air with the razor, then returned it to his throat.

"Ran despises any accumulation of wealth," he said. "I think you misunderstand."

Ignal placed a finger over his lips. "Ran is beneficent. Powerful. Terrible. He deserves so much more than you can imagine." She pressed the razor against his throat once more.

Sulrad flinched as the razor bit into his flesh.

Blood trickled down.

“Ran will heal you.” Ignal placed her hand over the small cut. “Carnem omenem iterem,” she muttered.

Was she trying to do magic? Sulrad let his power examine her. Had she somehow come to possess magic? How would such a thing be possible? A warmth emanated from one of her pockets. She was carrying a stone with her — one of the sky-iron crystals. He examined it with his magic. No. It wasn’t one of those, but subtly different. He let his power wrap around the stone. It was filled with magic.

Normally, a wizard could not heal himself, but what if he used the magic she carried? It was not his. Could he direct it?

“Carnem omenem iterem,” he silently mouthed the words.

The blood stopped.

His flesh knit itself together.

Ignal withdrew her hand from his throat and wiped it on the towel. She looked at it for a while as if surprised that the healing had actually worked, then folded it closed with aching slowness.

Without a word, she turned and left.

As she closed the door behind her, Sulrad was certain he’d heard her utter a single word.

Priestess.

FUNDING

SULRAD

A moon had passed since the baron agreed to allow Sulrad to continue his work of bringing Ran's beneficence to the people. More and more, he reserved his healing magic for the wealthy. It bothered him at first. Wasn't Ran's mercy for everyone? He'd thought that at first, but now he wasn't so certain. The wealthy, while they at first appeared greedy and self-interested, followed through when he gave them instructions to care for a wound or an infirmity. More often than not, those with lesser means returned time and time again with the same malady, taking scant care of their own bodies and expecting him to expend his precious magic on repeated and unnecessary healings. He had become a regular fixture at baronial court and had managed a passing acquaintance with the baron's court.

It bothered him that Rotiaqua either avoided sharing a meal with him or else sat there in silence for most of the meal. She made it abundantly clear that she no longer enjoyed his company. Even so, there was much the baron could do for Sulrad and he accepted any invitation offered.

During their last meal together, the baron had made it known to Sulrad that should a certain factor meet with an untimely end, the one who facilitated such an end would

receive the baron's gratitude in full measure. That evening when he returned home, Ignal greeted him as she so often did. She escorted him to his quarters and helped him wash away the dust from the road. At first, he had balked at her touch, but he was growing accustomed to it. He actually found himself looking forward to it.

"How was your meal with the baron?" Ignal asked as she dipped a rag into the hot soapy water and dabbed at his face.

"The baron has asked me to undertake a task on his behalf. He wants me to remove someone who is less than enthusiastic about paying his taxes."

"Do I know him?" Ignal hopped up onto the bed beside him, her legs swinging in the air.

"Quentor?" Sulrad asked.

Ignal gasped. "He's a crafty one. I hear he has his own private army to defend his holdings. He cuts timber wherever he wants without regard to who owns the land."

"Not an upstanding citizen?"

Ignal laughed. "Are any of them? Money lenders, merchants, buyers and sellers of goods, factors who deal in all sorts of merchandise. Have you ever met one who is honest and upstanding?"

"I have little experience, but the ones I have met would like me to think they are honest. Their business depends on what their customers think of them, does it not?"

She looked him in the eye. "No one wants a bad reputation. The baron wants this Quentor removed. What is your concern?"

"I'm not certain this is the right thing for me to do. The baron has promised me that I can have the holdings if the man were to meet with a sudden misfortune, but Quentor has done nothing to me that merits that sort of treatment. This does not feel right."

"The baron promised you Quentor's holdings?"

"He has."

"Including the lumberyard?"

"I presume so."

"The large lot in the center of the factor district?"

"I have not seen it, but I believe that would be part of it."

She clapped her hands. "That is the perfect place for our temple. It's right in the middle of the factor district. Everyone will be able to see it. The other factors will be overjoyed. They complain about the noise and the dust from that place. You have to do this."

"I have yet to make up my mind," Sulrad said.

"Go meet Quentor. Then decide. I'm confident you will agree with me. He is despicable and needs to be dealt with."



The following day, Sulrad donned his robe, tying it tight against the chill breeze that had blown in from the ocean. The crispness of the morning had not yet been driven away when he escorted Ignal to the factor, Quentor's place of business. The whole street was lined with long, low buildings, most with open fronts covered in canvas that housed the stock in trade. Sawdust drifted onto the road and mixed with the mud to make a hard-packed surface. The scent of pine was strong with just a hint of burned wood. Sulrad half expected to hear the whine of a saw blade, but realized that without water, the lumber must be cut at a mill and shipped here for sale.

"This whole block is his," Ignal said. "He's almost never here."

"Then why have you brought me here?"

"So you know what is at stake." Ignal waved at the structure. "Imagine this as a stone structure three stories tall. Right there," she pointed to the center of the building, "will be the spire." She leaned back and placed a hand

above her eyes to shade them from the sun. "It will reach to heaven itself."

"You have such grand plans," Sulrad said. He was still coming to grips with her vision of a grand temple. Was that truly something Ran desired? Opulence on a scale that made him blush just to think of it? Still, whenever she talked of her grand plan for the temple, Sulrad felt the statue of Ran radiating its pleasure. Surely that was a sign that his own modest plans were maybe too understated.

"Nothing is too grand for one who healed my son," Ignal said. "Ran is to be praised, and this is the place where that will happen."

Sulrad winced. Ever since that day he had used his magic to encourage her faith, she had been a strict adherent, oftentimes taking Sulrad to task for failing to give Ran enough credit or failing to rely on his mercy.

"I have yet to agree to anything."

"You will. Just wait and see."

"If Quentor is what you say he is."

"Oh, he is what I say he is. Just wait until you meet him."

"I'm not rushing to judgment."

One building away, the canvas front lifted, and a man stepped out and turned to walk in their direction. Quentor was nothing like Sulrad had imagined. He was young, trim, and handsome. He wore his beard trimmed short, his hair was well-groomed, and he had a smile that was infectious.

"Ho. What brings you to my world?" he asked when he reached them.

"I am thinking about purchasing lumber for a new construction. I have been told that you possess the best."

"You a carpenter, then?"

"No. Just a humble priest interested in building a temple."

"So what do you know of wood?" Quentor asked.

"Very little," Sulrad said. He had some idea what was important, but only the vaguest notion.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find you a good deal. You can trust Quentor.”

Sulrad caught the tiniest sense that the man was lying to him already. Perhaps he was not the kind and concerned merchant he portrayed himself as.

“Over here.” Quentor gestured to one of the tarps that had been pulled back to reveal stacks of wood. “We season these beams until they are ready for construction. These will serve you well. They are as straight and solid as the day is long.” He removed his leather gloves and ran his hand along the evenly planed wood. “Smooth as a newly shaven chin,” he said. “Go ahead. See for yourself.”

Sulrad placed a hand on the milled lumber. He had seen his fair share of green and well-seasoned wood when Merten chose the stock from which he carved his figures. Sulrad knew a thing or two about wood. He extended his senses into the wood. It was green, uncured. It had been cut straight but would warp when it cured, and deep within the wood, there was a rotten core and insects. The beams appeared strong, but under any weight, they would snap.

“I see. What else will I need?”

“You need boards to form the wall. Not unlike these over here.” Quentor led them to another rack of wood. The logs had been cut into planks. They appeared straight and flat and dry, but there was something else too. Sulrad placed his hand on one of the boards. It had been treated with poison. Why would someone do that? He probed deeper. There again, deep in the wood was a tiny network of holes bored no doubt by the insects the poison was meant to kill.

“How much would this all cost?” Sulrad asked.

“How big you planning to build?”

“A modest dwelling. No more than you’d find in any merchant quarter.”

Quentor whistled. “Merchant quarter? Those are some mighty fine structures. I’d say that you’re probably going to need four — four twenty — maybe even four hundred thirty

golds for starters. The whole job will probably run you just under a thousand, and that's if you're planning the basics. If you want the more exotic woods, it will cost more."

Sulrad looked at him, using his magic to see the truth of what the man said.

His figures were accurate if a bit inflated, but what he was thinking the entire time he spoke was how he could unload some lower quality lumber on Sulrad and pocket the extra golds. He would report the lower amount when he calculated his tithe to the baron and keep that extra as well.

"You look a bit shocked," Quentor said.

"No, just considering. How long will it take to get this delivered?" Sulrad asked.

"Depends on where you need it. If it's close by, you can have your men come and pick it up as you need it. I'll need you to pay for it all up front so I don't sell it to someone else and I won't charge you but a pittance for storage until you need it."

"That sounds just fine. I will consider it."

"Don't consider too long. The price could go up. You never know when there will be a big demand for lumber and if I sell this before you decide, it's gone. You'll be waiting until next summer to get more. It's not like it grows on trees."

By the end of their meeting, Sulrad was convinced that Quentor was every bit the snake Ignal had claimed he was.

Back at Ignal's residence, he sat down to consider what he had seen. Quentor did a good job coming off as an honest and upstanding merchant, but there was a core of rottenness deep within him that was dark. Sulrad had never seen such greed and gluttony before. Quentor stood for everything that Ran despised. As if in agreement, the statue at his neck grew warm. "You saw it too, then?" Sulrad asked the statue.

If only he had something of Quentor's to use when he crafted the potion he needed. The potion would be sweet,

something that would taste rich on the tongue but leave one in great pain and agony. The statue at his throat pulsed with energy. Surely Ran was pleased. Sulrad would remove the source of Quentor's sin. He would remove the man's wealth, his health, his family, everything.

"Wolfsbane," Sulrad told Ignal. "You have any?"

"No, but I can acquire some discreetly. I take it you have decided about Quentor, then?"

"He is most foul. I could tell as soon as I met him. He lied to me. Planned to take my coin and deliver lumber that would have crumbled and broken in a few summers. Not right away, mind you, but it certainly wouldn't have lasted."

"And no doubt by then he would have been able to blame the fault on you or the carpenters. Did I not tell you he's a crafty one?"

"Yes. He must go, but the bond-mate and child – they do not deserve his fate. I need a way to deliver the potion to him in such a form that he will not share it with his family."

Ignal paced the room, her hands behind her back. "Let me think. It is best if the punishment suits the crime, isn't it?"

"Yes, but so long as it works, I don't really care."

"He is a man of refined taste and reserves some pleasures for himself. He has a fondness for blackberry brandy, a distillate of wine that has both a strong taste and carries quite a kick."

"Strong enough to hide the taste of wolfsbane?"

"Plenty and it's dear, almost a gold a bottle. He won't want to share that with anyone."

"But his bond-mate and child? What are their names?" Sulrad asked.

"Vinta and Olen. Vinta's all right. She's a bit taken with herself, but the daughter is the one that everyone says is the image of her father. Maybe not the brandy, then. It could be shared."

"I promised the baron that I would only remove Quentor."

Ignal shrugged. "Ran spares some and takes others. If he spares these, you will take them on? As servants? The temple can always use them."

"In what way?"

"Vinta knows the trade well. She can assist with the construction of the temple, and when it's complete, we can send her to another town and build another temple."

"More than one?"

"Do you think only the people here in Frostan need to learn of Ran?" Ignal sighed. "Imagine it. Every town in the land will have a temple. The spires rising to challenge the clouds like an army of pikemen, all standing ready to do Ran's will across the land. He will be truly pleased with us then."

Sulrad laughed. "Sometimes I think you're worse than my father. All he ever thought about was Ran and how Ran blessed and chastised him."

"What else is there to think upon?" Ignal turned her gaze to him. "Have you not already begun to write down the teachings of the temple? The collected wisdom of the voice of Ran? We will teach the peasants how to read so that they can all learn for themselves. It will be grand, and it all started here."

Sulrad fidgeted. He had convinced himself that it was Ran's will that he remove Quentor and use the wealth so gained to build a temple. Most often Ignal's words rang true, but when she got like this, it made him wonder what came next. For both of them.

SPYING EYES

SULRAD

The ground had been cleared where the lumber factorage had once stood. The foundation of the new temple grew from the earth day by day until it was nearly complete. The temple would be so much larger than Sulrad ever imagined. Just the thought of the structure that would soon rise from this ground made him shudder. It was a far cry from the small home he had grown up in. But the temple was not his. It belonged to Ran. Sulrad had no need of such adornments. He wished he didn't have to keep reminding himself of that.

He sat in his room, free of distracting adornment despite Ignal's attempts to the contrary. He had decided to take his evening meal alone in his room, feeling that the solitude would do him good, but once again, Ignal had different plans for him. She brought him a tray of pastries and a vegetable dish she had taught the cook to prepare that she knew he was fond of. She placed the tray on the table beside his bed and took a seat.

"Something is troubling you?" Ignal asked.

"This is all so much. The temple. The healing. I feel drained."

"That's understandable. You've been so busy as of late. Has the baron been making demands on your time again?"

"No. So long as we send him his new temple tax, he is more than happy to leave me to my own designs. I send him reports on how the construction is progressing that seems to satisfy him."

"What is it, then?"

"Maybe it's just me. I feel off, as if something bad is about to happen and I am not prepared for it."

"You have Ran on your side. You need not fear."

"Yet I do." Goose flesh rose on Sulrad's arm. "See? Something is going to happen."

Before he could elaborate, Sulrad started shaking. It was as if someone had taken hold of his soul and given it a great jerk. A scream pierced his thoughts. Who would make such a noise?

The scream sounded again. This time, there was a desperation to it, as if someone were calling forth fire for the first time. A wizard? One of the young boys from Amedon? It had been moons since he had thought about Amedon and their mandate to have him killed. He had never lowered his guard, but it had ceased to be foremost in his thoughts. He had learned to shield his magic even before he reached Amedon and practiced that skill constantly, but here was one who had great power and no concept of how he radiated magic. It was the sort of young wizard Amedon had sent after him the last time. Were they still intent on destroying him?

"What is it?" Ignal asked.

"A wizard. I felt someone performing magic."

Ignal shrugged. "So there is a wizard nearby. How does that affect you?"

"Amedon has sent young wizards to kill me before. I thought they had given up, but now I fear they have renewed their attempts."

Ignal snorted. "A boy? You fear a boy?"

"Not a boy. A wizard. Last time, I nearly lost my life to one. I won't be so careless this time."

“How will you find him?”

“I can sense him. He just attempted to call forth fire. He was not successful, or not very, but he did reveal himself to me, and others.”

“What will you do?”

What would he do? He’d thought the wizards in Amedon had forgotten about him, that they had an unspoken truce since it had been so long since they sent someone after him. He should have known better. They were patient and vindictive. They would never let him live his life free of their dictates. There could be no other answer. But what if he was wrong? What if the boys were innocent? He needed to know.

“Find him. See if they have already turned him against me. Try to recruit him to help heal the people of Frostan. I’m growing weary of all this healing. I don’t recover as quickly as I used to.” He debated explaining how the jewels stored magic and how he could call on them at need, and how he had all but drained them with the last healing, but she knew nothing of magic, and it would mean little to her.

“In the morn,” Sulrad said. “Then I will search for him. Tonight, I’m exhausted.”

Ignal strode over and sat beside him. “You are like a child. You strive mightily against those who defame the name of Ran. You heal those in need and think nothing of yourself. You need to rest. Take some time and relax. I’ll send someone in to anoint you with scented oils and work away your worries.”

“I’ll be fine,” Sulrad said. “I just need to sleep.”

“I brought you a gift,” Ignal said. “I have been saving it for just such an occasion as this.”

Sulrad pushed her hand away. “I’m too tired for a gift. Let me be.”

“You will want to see this.”

She waved to a servant who rushed in with a cage.

Inside the cage was a creature that looked like a weasel with wings and short curled horns. It cowered against the back of the cage as if afraid, tiny wisps of smoke emanating from its nostrils. As Sulrad approached, it let out a plaintive squeak then fell silent, quivering.

A mini-dragon.

"Where did you come by this?" Sulrad asked. The beasts were rare and expensive and carried magic. More magic than any woodland creature, and if the stories were true, more magic than even a wizard.

"The baron gave it to me. Well, not gave it to me. I made my argument that you had continued to fight his enemies and heal his people, and that you were deserving of some token of his appreciation. He acquired this when he arrested a trader who purveys such. He was going to have it put to death. I thought you might like it." She beamed with pride.

"I do."

"Well. Show me how it works," she said.

"How what works?"

"How you take its magic. You think I don't know, but I do. You speak in riddles, but I've seen the crystals. I know they're dying out. That's why I acquired this for you, so you can continue Ran's beneficent works. Come, I can read the plans for the temple, or more correctly, Vinta can. She said there is a room that was constructed early on in the building that is not on the plan. I don't know what you had in mind for it, if not this."

"You amaze me," Sulrad said. Not for the first time, he wondered if the diminutive woman had the ability to read his mind. At times like this, he would have believed her if she claimed to.

"I always wanted to see the power of Ran in action," Ignal said.

"You truly wish to see this? You are not squeamish?" Sulrad asked.

“Not where the power of Ran is involved.”



With the mini-dragon cage in hand, Sulrad guided Ignal through the darkened streets to the site where the great stones that formed the foundation of the temple lay. He needed no torch to light his way, even though she did. She held tightly to his hand as he led her along the passageway that led to the sacred room. Stones had been gathered from around the land, each one with intent and purpose. Some contained veins of crystal, others of gold or lead. None were common. None were plain.

“Here it is.” Sulrad pulled open the door. “I can’t see anything,” Ignal protested.

“Just a moment.” Sulrad flicked his hand toward the shadows. “Incendio ignius.” The words were unnecessary, meant for show more than utility.

A small fireball sprang to life in one darkened corner, chasing away the darkness.

“Again.” He turned to each corner in succession until all four sported bobbing balls of blue flame.

Ignal drew a breath.

Sulrad felt a wave of satisfaction. He had organized the work on the altar room in secret and hoped to surprise her. He had commanded its construction to safeguard his most prized possessions and provide him with a place to recharge his magic so that he could continue the work of Ran indefinitely. Deep beneath the floor, he had carefully laid most of the crystals from the sky iron. They were arranged in a pattern he had discovered in Amedon that would store power even beyond what each crystal could.

Above them, he had constructed a stone altar. Waist high, its solid marble top was engraved with a groove to catch the blood of his sacrifices. This was the place where

he would sacrifice the animals that the faithful brought as their offerings. He had never imagined using it for such a magnificent creature as the mini-dragon, but he grew excited at the prospect. If the mini-dragon did indeed have powers, he could charge up the very stones that made up the altar and store magic that would allow him to heal even the most infirm.

He set the cage atop the altar and lifted the cloth that hid the animal.

The mini-dragon cowered against the back of the cage.

Sulrad opened the door and reached inside.

The animal spat fire.

The hair on the back of his hand flashed away, leaving an odor that stung his nostrils.

“Haec tranquillitas bestia operimentum fiat.” Sulrad invoked an incantation meant to call the beast.

The mini-dragon ceased spitting fire, but it was still agitated.

Sulrad reached for it once more.

It snapped at his hand, needle-sharp teeth sinking into the flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

Sulrad drew his hand back.

“Let me try,” Ignal said.

“It bites.”

“I see that, but you’re making it nervous.”

Ignal hopped up on the step that surrounded the altar and let her peer into the cage. “What a beautiful creature you are,” she cooed. “I wish I had a shiny coat like you do. You’re a real treasure, aren’t you?”

Sulrad watched as Ignal soothed and calmed the animal. After a while, it started purring like a kitten. When she eventually reached into the cage, it licked her hand and let her stroke it. She ran her hand along the sleek fur, scratching its back, each time her hand returning quickly and starting again.

“Are you ready?” Ignal asked.

Sulrad almost forgot what he was about to do, so engrossed in watching her calm the animal. He pulled his thoughts back to the task at hand. "Ready."

Ignal stroked the animal's fur once more, then quickly grasped its horns and yanked it from the cage.

The animal let out a piercing scream and blew fire from its mouth, but Ignal had a firm grip on it. Twist and turn as it might, the beast wasn't going anywhere.

"The rope. Quickly. This thing is strong," she blurted out.

Sulrad reached into his pocket and withdrew the cord he had brought with him. He tied a quick loop around the beastie's hind leg and trussed it to the altar. When he had all four legs firmly tied, he took a step back. The beast still struggled, but it wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm not letting go until you make sure we're not going to both be scorched," Ignal protested.

Sulrad took another piece of cord, fashioned a loop, and slid it over the animal's snout. As he drew it tight, the fire ceased. Wisps of smoke still emanated from its nostrils, but at least the fire was gone.

Sulrad stepped back to admire his handiwork.

Everything looked fine, but something caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand.

"Did you see anyone when we came in?" he asked.

"No one but us."

"I could have sworn someone was watching."

She shook her head. "I'm certain we are alone."

"Let us proceed, then."

Sulrad withdrew his sky iron knife and raised it above the animal and paused.

"What are you waiting for?" Ignal asked.

"The right moment," he explained. "The sun and moon are sources of power. Their light helps the transfer. In a few moments, the moonlight will strike the animal and increase the power of the spell."

"Ran is truly magnificent, isn't he?" Ignal said.

"He is." Sulrad glanced about the altar room once more. He was certain this time. Someone was watching him. Just as he had once watched Rotiaqua. How could he use that to his advantage?

When he spoke with Rotiaqua, what he actually did was to create a portal through the timeless void that he could see through. It was akin to traveling. If someone was spying on him, that must be how. If he could seize that portal, he could send his magic back through it and catch whoever had formed it. It would take considerable power, but the mini-dragon lying before him on the cold stone would provide enough magic to do so.

"It's almost time." Sulrad turned to Ignal. "I'm not certain what you will see, but pay attention. I may need your eyes to tell me of something I might miss."

Ignal nodded, remaining silent.

The moonbeam touched the mini-dragon.

"Potestates intra mundi," Sulrad intoned, calling the mini-dragon's power into his world. As he plunged the sky iron blade into the creature, it cried out in fear. Blood splattered Sulrad and spilled onto the altar.

"Gratam intra mundi," he cried out.

Magic exploded from the mini-dragon and rushed to his chest, expanding his ribs until Sulrad thought he was about to explode. "Lapidibus," he cried out, commanding the magic to enter the stones and not his body. Pain flared in his chest where the magic collected. His breathing became shallow, his heart struggling to beat within a chest filled with fire.

He grew light-headed.

"What's happening?" Ignal cried out in alarm.

"Magic," Sulrad screamed. "Too much magic."

He leaned on the altar for support. Was this what it felt like to die?

No. He would not die. Not tonight. "To the stones. Do not enter me!" He shouted. "Mihi ne intraveritis."

The magic swirled around him like so many drunken fireflies, ignoring his commands.

The light was blinding.

Sulrad wrestled with the magic, urging it into the stones, but it fought him. As if someone else were commanding it, contradicting his orders. The swirling cloud of flaming motes separated from him and rushed to the corner of the altar room where they began swirling in an ever-growing circle. The sparks merged until there was only a ring of fire spinning in the corner of the room.

"To the stones," Sulrad shouted, but it did no good.

The magic had other plans.

Then came the noise.

A whistle that started low and quiet and rose in pitch and intensity until it was unbearable. Sulrad dropped to his knees beside an already prostrate Ignal. It was too much to bear, but it was over almost as quickly as it had started. The noise, the light. Nothing remained but the gentle moonbeam that illuminated the altar covered in blood.

Sulrad looked up.

There.

A small silver shimmer hovered in the air above him where the magic had been. Who would be able to do such a thing? Was it someone from Amedon? He watched as the portal cleared. In it, there was the image of a young man. Tall and thin, barely more than a boy himself. How could one have such power to attack Sulrad in his sanctuary?

No matter. He had committed a serious mistake. Sulrad would find him. He would have his head.

"I see we have an intruder," Sulrad said. "Welcome, welcome. No need to rush away. Come talk with me."

He threw a glance at Ignal. She saw it too. It was not just him.

He pressed his magic through the portal, fingers silently inscribing the figure for summoning in the air. He motioned to the table where the animal had been sacrificed, directing

the magic to fetch the intruder and bring him forth, but there was resistance, more than just the boy's magic. There were two of them.

Sulrad leaned toward the portal to get a closer look. The boy was young, but not a youth. A young man, and then another. That one was less distinct.

He pulled at both of them. Let them both come.

The second figure stepped closer to the portal.

He recognized her.

It was Rotiaqua.

With a loud pop, the portal vanished.

"Curse you," Sulrad screamed. Rotiaqua had turned on him. She was a traitor. That was why she had grown so cold toward him. She was working with another wizard. He could not let that stand. He would have the wizard on his altar and Rotiaqua would be his priestess. Nothing would stop him. Not now. Not ever. He was the chosen of Ran.

He glanced over at Ignal. She had collapsed on the floor.

He reached down to help her to her feet.

"What did you see?" he asked. "Did you see the magic? Did you see them, the intruders?"

She smiled at him and remained silent.

"What did you see?" he demanded.

"The hand of a god," she said.

GUIDANCE

GARLATH

The wizard Garlath stood before Alwroth and his bond-mate Uskin. He cast his gaze around the room, taking in the pair of comfortable chairs facing the low fire burning in the hearth. More often than not, the senior wizards were to be found staring into that fire. Uskin claimed it was the way she observed the wizards across the land, taking in their past, their present, and even their futures. To Garlath's eyes, the couple appeared to be partaking in a mid-afternoon sleep.

When neither stirred for a hand of heartbeats, Garlath cleared his throat.

Alwroth opened his eyes and frowned.

The scowl on the ancient wizard's face was growing familiar. Too familiar.

"There is another wizard in Frostan," Garlath said. "One we might use to help rein in Sulrad. This new wizard is young, his power just awakened, but he shows great potential."

"Isn't that what you said about the last two you sent against Sulrad?" Alwroth clucked his tongue. "Why do you continue to send young wizards with no training?"

"There is something going on in Frostan. Something I don't fully understand."

“Surely you don’t give credence to this god of his?”

Garlath had his suspicions about Ran. Certainly no statue of wood had the power to do what Sulrad ascribed to it. There must be something more. Something Garlath had yet to discern. Regardless of how he felt about Ran, the boy was becoming more and more convinced he held favor with the god, and where that might lead, Garlath wasn’t eager to see.

“He fears Ran’s retribution on him for his sins,” Garlath explained. “This may be a way to control him. If we can convince him that his god demands mercy, he may restrain himself.”

“How many wizards has he killed?”

“Three, but in all honesty, they were trying to kill him. He acted with no malice, simply self-interest.”

“And you believe that we should let matters develop for a while, see how things sort themselves out on their own?”

“Yes.”

“And the boy, the new wizard?”

“Zhimosom? I wish to contact him, train him up, see if we can’t use him.”

“Use him up, you mean.” Alwroth scratched at his beard. “No. You are forbidden. If you wish to see how things develop on their own, then leave them alone. No more wizards sent after Sulrad, no contact with the new young wizard, no contact whatsoever. Leave him alone. Prove that Sulrad is truly benign. I give you three moons. After that, if he has not settled down, we will send in a convocation of wizards. No amount of luck will save him then, and certainly not his god.”

“But, Zhimosom. He needs guidance. He needs to be instructed. He’s already broadcasting his magic to the world. It won’t be long and Sulrad will take notice. If he believes this Zhimosom has been sent by us, the boy’s life will be in danger.”

"Life is full of danger. You know that. Let him be." Alwroth raised an eyebrow at Garlath. "Are we clear?"

"Clear. I'm to leave the boy alone."

"Both of them. Sulrad and this Zhimosom. I don't want you to so much as send them a dream." Alwroth stood. "If you do, your own future may be called into question. You're not so senior yet. I will not tolerate insolence."

"No, Mighty One. I hear your words and I will obey."

"Good. See that you do." Alwroth gathered his robes around himself and vanished.



Garlath pushed his way through the throng of wizards pressing the halls after the end of their final class. They jostled one another, boasting about which of them would be most successful in whichever non-academic pursuit the particular cluster of students favored. By the time he reached his study, his head ached so badly, he could barely stand it. He pulled open the door to find Egrid standing at the table, a cup of steaming tea in her hand. She offered it to him and plopped herself in the chair across from his desk.

"How was the senior wizard this fine afternoon?" she asked.

"It went better than I expected."

"He forbid you to have any contact with either boy," Egrid said.

"Not so much as a word."

"But not the sorceress?"

"Sorceress?"

"You men. You think because she had the great misfortune to be born a woman, she does not matter in the grand scheme of things. There is one in Frostan that has just as much power as either of the boys you are so worried

about. You've completely overlooked the baron's daughter. Both of you."

"So I have. I've never worked with a sorceress before. I'm not sure where to begin."

"How about the same way you begin with a boy?" Egrid lowered herself into the chair across from Garlath, red curls settling about her shoulders.

"With a vision?" Garlath murmured more to himself than to his assistant.

"Of course with a vision," Egrid replied.

"You have a point. I will try tonight."

"Tonight? What's wrong with now?"

"Now?"

"Yes. Now. You have something more important to do?"

Egrid rose from her chair to stand behind Garlath. Her slender fingers gripped his shoulders and dug in. "Try now. While I ease your tension. You should have no problem contacting her. If she's come into her power as I've heard, she should be receptive. What harm comes from trying?"

Garlath let Egrid work her own special brand of magic on his tired flesh. He cleared his mind and relaxed, picturing the castle in Frostan where the girl lived. How far could it be? The castle was like any other, stones dug from the earth, shaped by masons, and placed carefully atop one another until the walls reached thrice the height of a man. The castle itself was perched upon a small hill, giving it a strategic advantage over any attacker. A stream ran through it, fed by the nearby mountains, there would be water aplenty to survive a siege. In the end, one castle was much like another, yet there was something strange about this one.

The walls seemed to grow as Garlath's vision approached. At first, it was imperceptible, and he dismissed the notion as his mind playing tricks on him, but as Garlath's thoughts tried to pass through the walls, the

castle grew higher. There was a spell at work here, a first-rate shielding spell.

"She's learned shields," Garlath muttered.

"Keep trying. You can find a way." Egrid's words came floating to him as if on the wind.

Garlath envisioned himself as a bird, a sleek black raven. He spread his wings, rising into the warm air that rose up off the fields around the castle, letting it lift him higher and higher.

The top of the wall was near. Just a touch more and he'd be over.

The walls grew higher.

"Curses," Garlath muttered.

"Relax," Egrid whispered.

"Again." Garlath imagined himself floating not toward the walls, but away. His raven body circled in tight spirals, working his way farther and farther from the castle until he was able to see over the walls. Perhaps that was what he needed. He circled tightly now in the warm air, letting it lift him almost to the clouds.

He glanced down. The eyes of a raven were so much better than his own.

The castle was far below. The walls looked more and more like normal walls and not the imposing and impenetrable barrier they had been.

He tucked his wings close and let his body fall, not straight down but on an arcing curve that would carry him over the walls and into the castle.

He let his success warm him as he gained speed. The walls were far below. He would pass over them in a hand of heartbeats, and then he would find the girl. He would warn her of the dangers she had become embroiled in and caution her against the budding wizard she had befriended. She could carry his word to the young wizard, Zhimosom. That would not be breaking his word to Alwroth. He would

not have any contact with either boy as he had agreed. Egrid had been correct. This was his way in.

He turned and banked, letting the gentle breeze carry him across the walls and into the castle.

The air before him glistened as if taking on the form of water. It shimmered, then solidified if that water had frozen.

He tried to stop, but the air was too thin.

He spread his wings wide and extended his feet to absorb the impact, but it did him no good. His raven body struck the barrier with a sickening thud.

His wings flattened out against the frozen air and his beak dug into the ice.

He paused there for a moment, ashamed of his failure. How could the girl have learned such techniques on her own? Had someone been in touch with her? Was she already the student of a master? And if so, who? No one in Amedon knew she existed outside of the council, and surely they were not already engaged with her?

Who then could it be?

Garlath drew his senses back to himself even as his raven body plummeted to the earth.

"Got you." Egrid's firm grip helped Garlath remain in his chair as the darkness threatened to overwhelm him.

"She's got some sort of shielding around her. It's like nothing I've encountered before." His words came in short staccato bursts as Garlath struggled to regain his composure.

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Good?" Garlath asked.

"Good. If she is shielded, then she makes the perfect agent. All you need to do is find a way to contact her."

"I'm not so sure that's possible. She's very strong. I only hope she chooses Zhimosom instead of Sulrad." Garlath shuddered. "Imagine what a mess we'd have on our hands if she joined his temple."

"She won't," Egrid reassured him.

"How can you know?"

"She's a woman." Egrid put her finger aside her nose. "I know these things."

"I sincerely hope you're right," Garlath said.

"Have I ever been wrong?"

"Not that I can remember," Garlath said. "But there is always a first time."

Not for the first time, Garlath wondered if he'd made the right decision in choosing Egrid as his assistant.

STOCKS

SULRAD

Three days had passed since the wizard and sorceress had intruded on Sulrad's study. Ignal had brought in an artist, and together, they had created a fairly good drawing of the boy wizard who had appeared before them. She spared little expense to have secret spies gather what information they could about him. As of yet, they had brought back nothing.

Sulrad was growing frustrated with Rotiaqua. She had spurned him. She was in league with Amedon. Why was he treating her with such kindness? Perhaps another approach was in order. When he expressed his concerns to Ignal, she had strong opinions of what was right.

"Perhaps it's time the baron learned what his daughter truly is," Ignal said.

"I need to remove this wizard first. They are working together. He will defend her."

"Tell me how I can serve." Ignal bent her knee and bowed.

"Encourage your spies to try harder. Find out where he lives, who he sees, what he does. Everything."

"Yes, Father," she said.

Father?

What was she thinking?

He was no one's father.

He had chosen a life of dedication to Ran. Hadn't he? But yet he was filled with rage because the upstart wizard had interfered with his plans to recruit the sorceress. Was that what bothered him the most? That she had turned against him? What about his vow to take no mate, father no children? Did he really mean it? How then could he be anyone's father?

"Why did you call me that?" he asked.

"Because you are the High Priest of Ran, and when I saw his hand on you, it came to me. You will be the father to our people. You will be Father Sulrad."

"Go find me the wizard."



The next afternoon, Ignal came rushing to the temple. "A young man had been exposed in the stock, one who fits the drawing we circulated. He was arrested for touching the baron's daughter. It must be him. Who else would be in a position to touch her? If you hurry, you can catch him before someone does him in."

Sulrad recalled the center of town. It was where they paraded him when he was arrested. They had shown him the stocks and the gallows and asked which he preferred. If the wizard was there, the crowds would already be shaming him. Not many were able to stay conscious the whole day. He had better not dally.

"Thank you for your help," he told Ignal as he rushed from the temple.

The streets were crowded, and he had to dodge patrons and vendors alike. More than once, he had to stand aside as a cart took up the entire street. In those moments, he tried to still his heart and concentrate. Perhaps he could quest

ahead and see if it was the wizard. If it was him, Sulrad had no doubt he would have shields in place to protect himself.

That was it.

Shields.

Sulrad cast about, looking not for the presence of a wizard, but the absence of anything. A wizard's shield was not perfect. If there were enough people around, they cast a slight glimmer of magic, just as any living thing did. In a crowd, the conspicuous absence of life would indicate either an unexpected gap or the presence of a wizard with his shields intact.

But how could he be certain that this was the wizard?

He rushed to the square, heedless of the toes he stepped on to get there.

"Hey, watch where you're going," called out an elderly woman when he brushed past her.

"Sorry, Grandmother," Sulrad called back, but he wasn't sorry. He was in a rush.

The square was filled with people. There was almost no place to squeeze between them.

Across the square, a young man was locked into the stocks. He turned his gaze toward Sulrad. It was the wizard, and he recognized Sulrad. The boy might not have been sent by Amedon, but no doubt, he had been trained by them. For all Sulrad knew, Garlath himself had been training the boy, but now Ran had smiled upon him. The threat from Amedon had been contained. The young wizard was locked firmly in the stocks. How fortunate was that?

A group of young boys surrounded the wizard, taunting him.

"Did you hear me? I asked you what you did." The eldest boy held a rock the size of his fist. He tossed it into the air and caught it, gaze focused on the wizard.

"Throw it," another boy encouraged the youth.

The boys surrounding the one with the rock began chanting. At first, a look of determination crossed the boy's

visage, but something was wrong. He fidgeted even as he grasped the rock. His face contorted in pain. He dropped the rock, sticking his hand into his armpit, howled, and knelt down.

When he tried to grab the rock once more, his fingers sizzled.

He jerked his hand back.

"Come on, throw it," one of the boys challenged him.

"You throw it." The boy kicked at the rock and rushed off, pushing his way through the crowd.

Sulrad reached for the rock with his magic. The young wizard had employed some very sophisticated magic. Sulrad felt the spell the wizard used to turn the rock into a ball of fire. It was crude and untrained, but had subtle undertones. The wizard had an innate ability to handle magic. He would make a good priest if Sulrad could turn him.

No time like the present.

Sulrad launched himself through the crowd. He would confront the wizard while the young man was locked in the stocks. What was the boy going to do, use magic to free himself, only to face the guards who had put him in the stocks to begin with?

Sulrad was halfway across the square when a young girl cut into his path. She was small and dirty, wearing a homespun dress that had seen better days. On her shoulders, she bore a yoke with a pail of water swinging from each end.

She crashed into him as if she had not seen him, pails spilling and water sloshing everywhere.

"Sir. I'm so sorry," she said.

"Get out of my way." He brushed her aside, but she stepped back into his path. It was as if she was intentionally trying to slow him down.

"I said out of my way." He gave her a shove, sending the pails of water sloshing as she tumbled to the ground.

He glanced up.
The stocks were empty.
The wizard was gone.



It was early afternoon when Sulrad gave up his search for the rogue wizard and returned to the temple. He was still fuming over the mishap in the marketplace when he arrived. The girl had intentionally tripped him. Was she working with the wizard? Had Amedon sent more than one person to destroy him? How had it come to this? He had let his temper get the better of him once, and now he was hunted by the wizards of Amedon for life. Would he never gain his freedom from them? He could see now that they would never relent. They would dog his footsteps until he did something about it.

"Father Sulrad. It's nearly time." Ignal entered his study carrying his robe. "The petitioners are here, and so is Rotiaqua."

"Is she a petitioner?" He could hardly imagine that.

"No. She said she is here to observe on the baron's behalf."

"What have you done with her?"

"Nothing as yet. What would you suggest?"

"Treat her like a petitioner. I don't want her to think she has special privileges here in Ran's temple."

"Very good." Ignal bowed and departed.

Sulrad donned the robe. It was heavy and scratched at his flesh. It gave him a sense of satisfaction to remember that he wore only as little as necessary. Ran would be pleased with his suffering. He glanced at the door to the audience chamber. What would he do with the girl? Treat her like a common petitioner? That would not endear him to the baron, and it would only make her less likely to join him

in his endeavors. He would receive her as a common petitioner, then elevate her to an honored guest. That would satisfy the baron and show Rotiaqua that he truly valued her.

He pushed open the door to find Rotiaqua already standing before the dais. He paused. She had lately been cold to him, but now she was openly hostile, in league with the wizards of Amedon. Somehow that changed the way he saw her. No more was she the aloof daughter of the baron. She was a wizard, poisoned by those who sought to do him harm.

He bit his lip. Better not to let her know how he felt. Treat her like an honored guest. Don't let her suspect.

"Welcome, My Lady," he said. "I am honored to have you here today. Is there something you need?"

"No, nothing," she replied. "I came here to witness your audience this morning. I hope it's not an inconvenience for you." She smiled a sarcastic smile.

Secretly, she must have been hoping that he would throw her out and she would have a complaint to carry back to her father. Well, he wouldn't let her get the better of him.

"No inconvenience." He raised his arm, and a young woman came scurrying. "Please bring my guest suitable seating."

"Right away, Father." She bowed her head and departed to return with a chair.

"Over there," Sulrad said. "Where my honored guest can have a full view of the proceedings."

"Yes, Father." The young woman did as instructed and gestured to Rotiaqua to take a seat.

Sulrad waited until Rotiaqua was settled and then nodded.

The first petitioner arrived, a cloth merchant, a man who had waited too long before seeking help for his gravely ill daughter. Sulrad could sense the desperation on the man's face. Perhaps he could be cleansed of his greed more than

the usual petitioners. Sulrad was coming to believe that Ran took pleasure in removing the source of gluttony and greed from one such as this. This man could afford more than most, and bore a greater burden of wealth than most. Sulrad admonished the man for waiting too long and dismissed him, knowing that he would not accept Sulrad's decision. How could he? It was his daughter that he petitioned for, not himself. The man would be back, and next time, he would offer even more, and more was what Ran would take from him.

Sulrad expected the man to leave when he was rejected, but he did not.

Rather, he offered a serving girl as an additional payment, someone to toil in Sulrad's kitchen.

That was interesting.

Ignal's servants had been assigned to see to his needs, but they seemed to have little regard for Ran. Perhaps this would be a way to start his own cadre of adherents. A young, impressionable girl could be trained to see the beneficence of Ran. Perhaps this was the way to begin.

As the man spoke of the girl, something tugged at Sulrad's senses.

He extended his magic to the petitioner and used that to guide his thoughts to his home. The girl he was offering was the same one who had tripped him up in the market. How powerful was Ran to bring him the very people who owned her and have them offer her up as payment?

"I will see your daughter," Sulrad said. "Bring her to the temple tomorrow after the noon meal, and bring this servant girl too." He wasn't certain what he would do with a serving girl, but Ignal certainly would. It appeared that his household was growing whether he liked it or not. The amount of gold the cloth merchant was able to part with gave Sulrad pause. The temple would be completed that much sooner. Certainly that was a good thing. He was doing

the right thing here. Bringing glory to Ran and golds into his coffers.

The man bowed and backed out, thanking him for his kindness.

The parade of petitioners was long and Sulrad was growing bored. He surveyed the never-ending line of folk who came to beseech some favor of him and shook his head. It was too much. He'd bring the audience to an end and get some rest, but before that, one last petitioner caught his eye. Not moments before, a family had arrived with a young boy in tow. He was around fourteen summers in age, with unevenly cut hair and a freckled face that resembled his mother's. He glowed with magic.

"Father. Our son has had the dreams we were instructed to watch for," the mother said, bowing.

Sulrad tried to control his racing heart. "What dreams are those?"

"Fire, Father. He dreams of fire and it comes true. He almost burned down the homestead with his dreams." She swatted the boy across the head.

"Fire?" Sulrad turned to the boy. "You dream of fire and it comes to pass?"

"Yes, Father." The boy twisted from side to side, his hands jammed deep in his pockets. He hunched over as if trying to make himself appear smaller, but the magic was indisputable. He was a wizard. Powerful enough to serve the temple already. Or was he, too, a pawn of Amedon? Had the boy already been contacted by those who sought to do Sulrad harm, or was he innocent?

Sulrad motioned the boy forward. "Please come here."

The boy hesitantly took a few steps and stopped. He turned to look at his mother, who made a shooing motion, urging him forward. "Come, boy. There is no reason to be afraid," Sulrad said. "Come here so I can get a look at you." Sulrad put his hand on the boy's head and held the other, palm up, before the boy's face, as if cupping something

invisible. Was there the mark of Amedon on him? How could he even tell?

"Please imagine fire," he instructed the boy.

The boy closed his eyes and concentrated. The screech that Sulrad had heard before when a boy did magic split the air. He glanced around. No one else heard it. It was magic. But not as strong as Sulrad expected. It was as if the boy's magic had already been shielded by something. Had the wizards of Amedon done this? He glanced over at Rotiaqua, seeing some spark of recognition to confirm his fears. If this boy was shielded by the wizards of Amedon, and Rotiaqua had had a hand in his training, there would be some sign.

Rotiaqua seemed disinterested in the proceedings.

Perhaps he had been mistaken about her, but the boy. There was no doubt about it.

Sulrad gathered his magic and surrounded the boy, pulling at the shields that damped his magic, and spoke softly. "Fire. Right here in my hand. Imagine the flame centered on my palm, a few digits tall and blue."

Suddenly, a flame burst forth in Sulrad's hand and quickly extinguished.

There.

The boy had magic and was shielded. No doubt to allow him to infiltrate the temple and, at the most opportune moment, to drive a sky iron knife into Sulrad's belly. Let him try. Once Sulrad had him in his power, he would see what magic the boy had and what he intended to do.

"Very good. You have the gift." He patted the boy on the head. He turned to the woman who had brought Rotiaqua the chair and motioned her to take the boy.

"Go with her." Sulrad pushed the boy toward her.

The boy hesitated and turned back to his mother. The woman made the same shooing motion, urging him to comply.

When the boy disappeared from view, Sulrad said to his mother, "Is there anything else?"

The woman coughed into her hand and extended it palm up.

"You expect a reward?" Sulrad demanded. "I'm taking your son on as an apprentice. I'm relieving you of a mouth to feed. I'm removing a potential danger to you and your family. It is you who should be paying me. How well would things go if the boy dreamed of fire when you were all sleeping?"

"We are poor, Father." The woman bowed her head but showed no signs of leaving.

Always coin with those who sought his favor. He had promised a reward, but these people had brought him not an acolyte who would gladly serve the temple, but a spy who would attack him when he least expected it.

He fished a battered silver from his pocket and tossed it to the woman. "Here. This is for the boy, less what I deserve for saving your family the trouble of feeding him."

"Thank you." The woman caught the coin and pocketed it.

Sulrad put her out of his mind as she turned to leave. Here was another agent of Amedon. How many could they afford to send against him? Perhaps they would tire of losing promising young wizards one day and stop this foolishness. He hoped it was so. In his heart, he knew it wasn't. They would keep sending wizards after him until he was dead. He could harbor no illusion that this was not so. There would never be a moment's rest while the city of Amedon stood. Of that, he was certain.

4°

BRILL

SULRAD

The next afternoon, the petitioner, Anelm, returned as requested. Rotiaqua followed close behind them. She was dressed in the garb of a merchant. He gave it scant thought because following close behind Anelm was the girl from the market.

Thank Ran for delivering his enemies right into his hands.

Sulrad settled into a seat across from Anelm's daughter. She was small for her age with long sandy hair much like her father's. She had the flux. A deep and angry green had invaded her lungs.

She was not far from death, but perhaps he could save her.

With the help of Ran's goodness.

He reached for the power of the stones beneath the altar. They were growing weaker every time he accessed them, but there was still some small amount of magic there. He employed that magic to create the ghostly hand he used for healing and plunged it into the girl's chest. The infiltration of the flux had gone on far too long to make this a simple healing.

"Let me see what the Lord Ran can do for your daughter," he mused.

Sulrad placed his hand on the girl's head, tilted her face, and looked her in the eyes. "Do you believe that Ran can heal you?"

The girl tried to twist her head and look to her father for an answer, but Sulrad held her firm.

"Not what your father believes. What you believe."

"I ... I do," she stammered.

He closed his eyes and reached out for the power of the stones. It was there, but there was something else. Along with the power he drew from the crystals, he was able to access Rotiaqua's power! Was it because she was present or would it work from anywhere?

He almost opened his eyes in surprise.

What a perfect pair they would make.

He, able to draw on her power when he grew weak; she, able to sustain him and learn from him. It was a perfect pairing, if she would only open herself to him.

She chose to ally herself with the powers of Amedon.

It made his blood run hot. How could she do such a thing to him? Had he not befriended her when he first saw her? Had he ever done anything to harm her? She had healed him back in the field when he had been attacked. Their blood mingled. They were bonded. That was what gave him access to her magic.

He reached for it.

She shut him out.

He pressed harder.

Nothing. She was shielded, yet she still maintained that she was no sorceress.

Perhaps it was time to address that with the baron.

"Ran, haec cura puer," he called on Ran to heal the child. "Abigerunt et abstrulerunt pr noire."

As he spoke, his power engulfed the girl. Swirling sparks of green and gold wove themselves into a tight net about her, swirling and contracting. The brilliant ball of sparks

centered around her chest. The ball grew smaller and smaller.

The girl winced.

Sulrad felt his magic waning. He had to do something. He tried again for Rotiaqua's magic. This time, he was able to draw to from her even as she fought him.

She glared at him.

He didn't care. Healing the girl was his only concern.

He tugged, wrapped their magic together, and shoved it at the girl.

With a loud pop, the magic vanished. It was gone and so was the flux.

Sulrad relaxed and drew a deep breath.

Rotiaqua glared at him as if her mere gaze could set him on fire.

Let her. He didn't care. He had done what was necessary.

"She is well," he told the parents. He was exhausted and almost completely drained of magic, but he had healed the girl. It reminded him of his early days in Frostan when he had first begun healing. Those were such simple days. He almost wished he could return to them.

"For your trouble," Anelm held out a small sack of gold.

"Not my trouble. Ran's blessing." Sulrad pocketed the gold. "The serving girl?"

Anelm called for a servant who dragged the serving the girl forward.

"All yours," he said. "May you have more luck with her than we have."

Sulrad grabbed the girl by the arm. "You belong to me now. You do as I say and serve Ran well. If you do, you will live a happy life and receive many blessings. Cause me trouble and Ran will have an extra sacrifice."

"No one owns me," she spat back.

"I do." Sulrad ordered her to sit, then turned to Rotiaqua.

"So you have felt the hand of Ran personally. What do you think?"

"I think you're a wizard and a charlatan."

"Have you not witnessed the power of Ran here today? Could you or any healer you know have driven such a flux from the girl?"

"Not I, but I saw no evidence of your god at work here. I will have words with my father about this."

Sulrad drew in a breath. "Perhaps while you are having those words with him, you will also tell him that you are a sorceress. I'm certain that's something he will receive with great joy."

She shot him a look that could have withered wheat on the stalk and stormed out. Why did Rotiaqua's rejection bother him so? It was almost as if she had some sort of a hold on him that he couldn't shake. He took a deep breath to compose himself, then turned back to the girl. "You are in league with the wizard?"

"I don't know no wizard," the girl said.

"But you do. It saddens me that you hold me in such low regard to lie to me like this, especially since I have rescued you from a life of servitude."

"So you're going to free me?"

"If you cooperate with me," he said. "Tell me of the boy in the stocks. Who is he? Who sent him to kill me?"

"He's my friend," she said. "I'm not going to tell you his name."

"Are you certain? I can drag his name from you if I need to. I'd rather not. I'd rather you simply told me. What have you to gain by hiding this from me?"

He looked her over. Underfed. Dirty. Hands calloused from hard work. Barefooted. She had grown up on a farm and only recently moved to the city, if his guess was correct. Perhaps he could sense more without resorting to extreme measures. He didn't want to hurt her. If she cooperated, she could serve him well.

"Come now. Tell me the story of how you came to be here." He sent his magic questing for her. He would read her as she spoke, see if she was telling the truth or not.

Something was wrong. His magic was diminished most certainly, but a simple tell of her emotions took very little magic. Still, she was a closed book to him. The girl was shielded from his examination.

He pressed her with his power. It was useless.

She was protected.

Sulrad muttered a curse under his breath.

Even her?

The wizards had gotten to her.

"So you are in league with the wizard," he said. "A few days in the cell will help loosen your tongue."

He grabbed her by the arm and led her to a room he had constructed adjacent to the altar. It was intended to hold the sacrifices before they were offered to Ran. It would suffice to hold the girl until he could decide what to do with her. He could not let her run free. Of that much he was certain.

He shoved her into the cell. "Enjoy your time alone."

"He'll come for me," she spat.

He closed the door and locked it. "I'm counting on it."



The girl's shields told Sulrad that he was still a target for the wizards of Amedon and that they had indeed recruited a local wizard to pursue him. This was not the boy whose strength had recently awakened. This was a wizard of some power and sophistication, even if it was based on raw talent and not education. Still, Sulrad could take no chance. He set guards outside the temple that would keep anyone out, anyone but a trained wizard, that was. For them, he had set a special spell, one that would warn him should anyone

breach his defenses. It was an old spell, laid out in vague descriptions in one of the dustier scrolls in Amedon. His time there had not been a waste. If the great wizards had had any inkling of all the spells he would come to learn, they would have killed him when he first arrived in Amedon.

A few evenings later, the spell triggered informing him that his perimeter had been violated. Someone had entered the temple. A wizard.

Sulrad raced down the passageway. He sensed the wizard there and knew precisely where he was. He turned the corner to confront the boy he'd seen in the stocks. What a fool. He had fallen right into Sulrad's trap.

A small fireball glowed in the hand of the wizard. He held the hand of the serving girl with his other, as if he were afraid she would run away.

"Going somewhere?" Sulrad raised a fireball of his own, larger, more brilliant.

The young wizard increased the light of his fireball. No longer a simple means to guide his way, now the wizard meant to do battle. His magic was strong, stronger than Sulrad had expected. This was indeed the wizard who had allied himself with the baron's daughter.

"Ah, I recognize this magic," Sulrad said. "I've felt you work magic on occasion. I've been looking for you, but you've hidden well. Now you've walked right in here to confront me."

It was almost comical. A young wizard sent to do the job that even the more seasoned wizards of Amedon had failed at. "You can't win against me. You're hardly more than a boy."

The wizard remained silent, his fireball holding steady.

Sulrad shrugged. Let the boy make the first move.

The wizard shoved the fireball at Sulrad. It moved with more speed than Sulrad expected, but not fast enough to break through his own shields. He laughed as it shattered into a shower of sparks.

Now to capture the wizard. The boy's magic would recharge the altar stones, and another threat from Amedon would fall.

"That was respectable." Sulrad said. "You can take pride in knowing that your death will power healing spells for dozens of men and women more deserving than yourself."

"Homenum ligare," Sulrad intoned. He formulated the spell in his mind that would wrap the wizard in magic and bind him fast until Sulrad could summon the guards to take him away.

"Huius silentum," Sulrad said, invoking the spell that would silence the wizard from speaking the words of his own spell.

Power flowed through him. Sparks flew from his fingers. It was blinding and should have worked, but when his eyes adjusted, there was no wizard, only the girl.

How could one so uneducated, so young overcome a spell that Sulrad had developed summers ago with the knowledge he so laboriously dug from the great library? Was the boy that powerful? How could anyone be that powerful? He was nothing more than an ignorant farmer. Yet he had defeated Sulrad.

"Where is he?" Sulrad demanded.

"I don't know," the girl said innocently.

"Well, aren't you just the little liar," Sulrad said. "Come with me. I may yet have use of you."

He dragged the girl to the altar room, where he bound her to the cold stone. Her eyes were wide with fear and she struggled, but he was stronger than her. For a moment, he thought of casting a binding spell on her but decided against it. She needed to be aware of what was happening here. She needed to think he was going to sacrifice her. It was her fear that would call the wizard.

"Defy me, will you?" Sulrad cinched the final cord in place.

He gazed around the room. Clearly, Ignal had been here. A statue stood at the end of the altar. It portrayed a strikingly beautiful woman that bore a strong resemblance to Ignal, only the figure portrayed a woman of full stature.

Cradled in her arms was his sky iron knife.

How had Ignal found that? Was she performing sacrifices? What would happen if someone with no magic were to sacrifice a wizard on the altar? Would the stones absorb all the magic, or would it be wasted? What had Ignal been up to while he was occupied?

He would have to have a long chat with her.

"I'll tell you nothing," the girl said.

"I don't need you to cooperate," Sulrad replied.

He pressed his magic against her, but the shields that protected her were firmly in place. Who was maintaining this magic?

He relaxed, loosed his magic, and gently probed the shield surrounding the girl. It gave him a strong impression of the young wizard and looked much like the shield Rotiaqua now carried.

"What is his name?" Sulrad demanded.

"Do what you must. I will never tell you."

"Why is his magic around you? Who is he to you?"

"A friend. Nothing more."

"Why do you defend him? Don't you see that I am prepared to take your life?" Sulrad gestured to the altar. Surely the girl could guess what happened here? The smell of dried blood was strong.

"I won't tell you his name."

Sulrad pushed his magic against her shield. The filthy little liar wasn't going to get away with keeping secrets from him. He would drive the spell inward until it collapsed. No untrained wizard was going to outsmart him.

He pressed harder.

The shield grew stronger.

He drew power from the crystals to break the spell.

It grew stronger.

Again.

Stronger still.

"There is a way through your shields," Sulrad said.

The girl remained silent.

A shimmering silver surface appeared in the air above the altar. It was the wizard, watching him through a portal he had created despite Sulrad's shields.

I hope you are watching closely. This is on your conscience.

Sulrad hated to take the life of an innocent, but hadn't she just confirmed that she was no innocent? She as much as admitted to being part of a plot to kill him. If he let her live, she would surely do so. She was no innocent. She was a murderer in waiting. A sneak-thief with designs on Sulrad's life. It was his right to dispatch her, not his duty. And it would be a direct stab at the boy wizard. It was fitting. It was a pity that she had no magic. That would have been an additional benefit, but at least he could stop her from becoming more of a problem.

Sulrad waited for the moonbeam to strike the sky iron knife. He drew the knife from the statue and struck. One swift slice across the girl's throat.

The girl's shields found him.

He cursed the wizard. How was the boy doing such a thing? How much power did he have?

Sulrad created a spell to penetrate the shield. It was an arcane spell of parting that he had come across in the library in Amedon. Little chance the boy would know how to counter such a spell.

He pressed the knife harder as he spoke the words of the spell.

The shield collapsed, and the girl's meager native magic was released all in one burst. It was like taking the life of a rabbit or a field animal. She had no powers of her own to speak of, but the girl had accumulated magic inside her

protective shield. Too much magic. Was this a trap set for him?

It was overwhelming. So great was the surge of magic that Sulrad forgot to guide some of it to the stones. He reeled back as the magic rushed from the girl and struck him in the chest. It was enlightening, heady, powerful. He could sense the girl's history, how she had grown up on the farm, and how she had been rescued by the young boy. Zhimosom was his name. He had a name now. It sounded familiar, but he let that thought go. The wizard had brought the serving girl to the city. He was responsible for her. It was because of him she was here. It was because of him she had yielded up her life.

Sulrad glanced up at the shimmering portal.

The face of the young wizard looked on in horror.

"I told you. This is what you have wrought."

The young wizard in the portal let out a silent scream.

It gave Sulrad satisfaction to see the pain he had caused. The wizard would surely forget his carefully laid plans now. He would be enraged. Sulrad could use that. He could follow that rage back to its source, but when he tried, he was stymied. There was a shield preventing him from following or even discerning where the wizard was.

He pressed against the shield.

It grew stronger.

He paused, examining the intricate web of energy that barred his access to the portal. It was formed of the same magic the girl had possessed.

"Clever boy," Sulrad said. He began to pick at the spell, slowly unraveling it until it started to weaken.

"I'm coming for you next," he said. "You and the baron's daughter."

He gestured to the altar where the girl's body lay. "With every sacrifice, I gain strength that you will never know," Sulrad screamed.

He released the magic he had just absorbed attacking the silver portal, ready to follow it through and finally get his hands on the boy wizard. Sparks flew from his fingers.
Take that.

But the portal was gone, and so was the wizard.

4I

DREAMS

SULRAD

Sulrad woke to a cold sweat in the grip of a nightmare that had filled him with dread and set his heart racing. He was certain he was about to die. He'd been hiding. Hiding beneath the floorboards in the barn. Hiding from the men who killed his family, the ones who strung up his father, his mother, and his brother. None of his family had been dead when they were hoisted into the air. The men broke their ribs and stomped on their chests with heavy boots before fastening the rope to their arms and trussing them behind their backs. The men had laughed at the screams as they slowly raised one after another of his family into the air.

Nothing less than death could stop the screams that tormented him so.

But it was not him.

He had not witnessed these grisly murders.

Someone else's nightmares gripped him, threatening his sanity.

He shook them off and sat up, stripping the soaked bedding from his body. Maybe light would drive away the horror, or at least bury it for another day. He flicked his fingers at the candle. "Incendio ignius." As of late, he had

only to think the words of the spell or employ the smallest gesture to invoke the magic within him.

As the candle burst to life, filling the room with its warmth, a second presence clamored for his attention. This time, it was the boy, the budding wizard who had been sent to do him harm by the wizards of Amedon. The one he had purchased from his own mother. Sulrad shuddered. Were the spirits of those he had killed coming back to haunt him? Was this how Ran planned to torture him for the sin of taking an innocent life?

He cast his gaze about the room, seeking a shadow or a wraith that would tell him his suspicions were true, but he was alone, truly alone.

He heaved a sigh of relief, but his breath caught. What if the nightmare was the wizard Zhimosom's doing? What if this was his way of attacking Sulrad? There could be a portal lurking in the shadows even now. Sulrad imagined it, a shimmering silver ring filled with the image of the wizard Zhimosom and the sorceress Rotiaqua snickering at his fear, laughing at his weakness.

He extended his hand and called forth a fireball, raising it high above his head to chase away the shadows from the far reaches of his chamber. There was nothing there, not even a hint of dust or a cobweb. The acolytes had been diligent in their tasks. The place was spotless.

What was happening? Sulrad mentally reviewed the more arcane studies he had managed to find during his stay in Amedon. There were several texts that spoke of the joining of magic between two individuals, the pair bonding. When this happened, a wizard and sorceress were able to share their magic. If the text was correct, they shared an emotional tie that bordered on telepathy. But this was not that. He had taken the magic of another and been plagued by her nightmare. Perhaps it worked the same? When he had taken the magic from the thieves, he had taken their

souls as well, and the souls were struggling to make their way back to the surface. It gave him pause.

When he had taken the magic from the thieves, he had also absorbed their memories. He reached for them. There was nothing to fear from those memories. He had access to them even now. He reached for the servant girl's memories that had no doubt inspired the nightmare. The girl had been out in the fields when the men came. The king's men, no doubt. She had witnessed the brutal murder of her family. No wonder she had nightmares. Those nightmares were his now. He had felt the tug, as if the girl were trying to take over his body. He glanced down at his palms where sharp fingernails had bitten into soft flesh. She had done that. He remembered the pain as she had pressed her nails into her own palms to help her hold her peace while the men did their work.

It was as if he had been watching himself have the nightmare. As if he were a prisoner in stocks, unable to move or participate. He had known it was a nightmare, deep down inside. The things he witnessed had never happened to him. He still felt helpless, petrified, frozen in place as the darkness wrapped itself around him.

He pushed the feelings away. He was only acting in self-defense. Everyone he had killed had been sent after him or otherwise threatened him. They were all agents of Amedon. All sent to kill him. He had done no wrong. It wasn't a crime to defend oneself against an attacker who threatened bodily harm. The girl might have been innocent of trying to kill him herself, but surely she was enmeshed in a plot to do just that. She was in league with the scheming Zhimosom, a wizard of immense power. This Zhimosom showed signs of power greater even than Sulrad's. He had a sophistication to his spells that Sulrad had yet to achieve, even after summers of grueling study. He was the kind of student who would have led the torment of one like Sulrad back in Amedon.

"Keep saying you're innocent, but you know you're not," the serving girl's voice came to him as if from far away.

Sulrad jerked his head around. Surely there was a portal to the void opening even now. The girl was a distraction. A ruse to hold his attention while the wizard attacked him.

"I'm no murderer. I only did what you forced me to," Sulrad shouted at the specter that had formed in the air before him. It was black and insubstantial, and about the size the girl had been in life.

"You *are* a killer. A cold and vicious killer. Just like the men who killed my family." A thin, insubstantial arm leveled an accusing finger at him.

"I'm no killer. I had no choice."

"No choice? You had nothing but choices. I was no harm to you, yet you chose to harm me when I did nothing to you."

"You were shielded. By the wizard."

"I knew it not."

"That matters not."

"You killed me because Zhimosom protected me. I was no threat to you. I was innocent."

Her words hit him with no less force than if she had struck him with her fist. Was she innocent? Was he a killer?

"You were in league with him," Sulrad said.

"He saved me when my family was killed then abandoned me in a city I knew nothing of. I barely knew him. He shielded me because he felt guilty for being unable to protect me. He is just like you. Caring for nothing but his own safety." Again the finger jabbed at him, cold and sharp in its accusation.

"No." Sulrad buried his face in his hands.

"Murderer. Murderer." The accusing voice was joined by a chorus as the young wizard, the young couple on the road who had robbed him, Quentor the lumber factor; they all joined in accusing him of murder.

He rolled onto the bed, drawing his legs tight against his chest, arms wrapped around his knees.

"Go away. I did nothing wrong. You came after me."

"Murderer... Murderer..." the voices chanted in unison. The specter of the girl was joined by others. They spun around, heads bobbing up and down in the flickering light of the candle.

"No. I did nothing but what was necessary to survive."

"Murderer..." The chant continued, rising in volume until Sulrad was certain the entire town could hear it. He couldn't bear the thought that the people he fought to cure would learn that he was a killer and his dreams of the temple of Ran would end before it had even begun.

And where was Ran in all of this?

Sulrad gingerly released his knees and brought his hands to the statue that hung at his neck. His fingers wrapped around the roughly cut wood, wood that had begun to take on a sheen from the repeated caressing of his fingers. What had once been a crudely roughed out shape had begun to take on a more refined and polished feel. He was surprised that he had never noticed it before. The old man was becoming straighter, less bent under the weight of the world as it had been when his father had fashioned it. The statue of Ran was transforming, becoming more a work of true art rather than the crude workings of a sometimes wood carver.

Was this a sign? Was Ran trying to tell him something, bringing this to his attention at this time?

"Ran, what have you to say about this?" Sulrad caressed the statue, not expecting a response. That wasn't how Ran worked. Ran was silent. He wished Sulrad to make his own way through this trial.

"Murderer." The chant continued, driving the thoughts from Sulrad's head.

"Stop!" Sulrad's words filled the bedchamber, echoing off the cold stone walls.

The voices halted.

"Be gone," Sulrad shouted.

Enough.

He would not listen to them. Let them be gone.

The door to his chamber flew open, and the specters vanished.

Ignal appeared in the open doorway bearing a lantern. "Father, what's wrong?"

"I had a nightmare. And a visitation." Sulrad's voice wavered as he spoke.

"Let me help." Ignal bore a small tray laden with a steaming cup of brew that smelled faintly of lilac.

"I'll be fine," Sulrad said.

"This will help." Ignal set the tray beside the bed and lifted the cup. "Tell me what you saw; perhaps I can help you make sense of it."

"It was the serving girl. Her parents were killed in a most gruesome manner. She has relived it every night since."

"I see. She was haunted by that memory."

"Yes." Sulrad shuddered.

"And you saved her from it."

"Saved her?"

"You took that memory from her. Took it upon yourself."

"I have the memory now," Sulrad demurred.

"And she is at peace. Gone to her final rest," Ignal said. "Without that memory."

"I suppose so."

"Then you have done her a great service." Ignal hopped onto the bed beside Sulrad. She placed her hand on his chest. "You have the heart of Ran. You showed his mercy to one who desperately sought escape. You have done her a kindness."

"I have sinned. I took a life. She wasn't trying to kill me. She wasn't in league with the wizard."

“Shush. You are no such thing. You can’t be a sinner. You are the hand of Ran. He works through you. How can you sin?”

“I killed them.”

“No. Ran killed them. You are but his implement. And Ran can commit no sin.”

“But it was by my hand.”

Ignal shook her head. “No. It was not your hand. It was the hand of Ran. You may not understand it fully, but Ran has a plan and you are but a part in that plan. A large part, but a part nonetheless. You cannot be a sinner when you are but carrying out his plans.” She paused, stroking his face. “Even if you don’t fully understand them yet. Have faith. In time, you will come to see that even this horrible nightmare was all a part of Ran’s grand plan for you.”

“They all stood in accusation. Every person that I have killed was there. Berating me, accusing me of murder.”

“Have you considered that it might be the wizard’s tricks? That he sent these accusing wraiths to undermine your confidence? That he means to attack you? In the very place you should feel safest? This is not the workings of Ran, but those of the wizards of Amedon. Ran is merciful. He would not send you a dream like this. He has you in his care. He has great things in store for you. He wants you to have peace. He needs you to have peace.”

“I’m not sure what Ran has in store for me. Why does he let me struggle so?”

“Because he trusts you. He knows how strong you are. He knows that you will never waver, not even when you experience such trials as this.” Ignal’s eyes glowed with fire. “Ran is forging you into a tool the likes of which has never been seen. Recall how your sky iron knife was forged. Was it not repeatedly placed into the flame and then drawn onto the anvil and struck with the hammer? Was it not at first crude and plain? Did it not become a thing of such beauty that all who see it draw a breath at its

magnificence? You are like that knife. Heated and struck. You are becoming a fine instrument. I myself have witnessed how Ran strikes you so, but I have also witnessed how you are taking the shape of a fine blade, the edge becoming sharper with each strike of the hammer."

"It's not pleasant," Sulrad said.

"I'm certain it's not, but mysterious are the ways of Ran," Ignal said. "He has such a grand plan in store for you that he fashions you so. It must be glorious to endure such trials knowing what a great task lies ahead."

Sulrad listened as Ignal continued, but his mind was already spinning. What did Ran have in store for him? And how many more times did the iron need to be struck? Even though Ignal's words rang true, he wasn't sure how much more he could take. Even the most carefully crafted blade occasionally shattered and the tool was lost.

WIZARD

SULRAD

Sulrad spent the day after his nightmare in quiet contemplation. Surely Ran had something grand in mind for him, yet why did the wizards of Amedon trouble him so? It was clear that the rulers of Amedon would stop at nothing to end his life, even though he had done nothing except to encourage a student to do something he was on the verge of doing all on his own. They were arrogant and rigid in their belief that he had committed some horrible crime, but how could he? He was Ran's hand. He had committed no crime. It was they who had committed a crime in throwing him out. He would turn the tables on them, and then they would regret ever expelling him from Amedon. He would find their wizard, take his magic, and use it against them.

But how?

He let his magic loose, more powerful now that he had absorbed the life force of the girl. She was another agent of Amedon that would no longer threaten him.

The wizard had appeared in a portal.

He had opened a path through the void and used it to spy on Sulrad.

Perhaps there was a way to follow that trail.

It would be difficult, but maybe, just maybe, he could do it.

Sulrad called up the doorway he used to access the void when he traveled, but this time, he did not step through it, not right away. He peered into the void, searching for a trace of the wizard. He had to be there. As Sulrad searched, the void formed around him like a hall with uncountable doorways. All he had to do was choose the right one.

He looked down, letting his senses follow any trace of magic that might remain.

There.

Footprints.

Sulrad leaned closer to the portal and examined the footprints. They belonged to the wizard. His magic emanated from them like the stink on manure. Sulrad could follow them if he chose, but where had the wizard gone?

Had he come all the way from Amedon? It didn't feel as if the footsteps extended for such a vast distance. More likely, the wizard was right here in Frostan. He had, after all, seen the wizard in town. He was probably living right here under Sulrad's nose.

Nothing to do but try.

Sulrad gathered his magic around him and stepped through the portal.

A small room materialized around him.

He raised a fireball as soon as he stepped from the portal lest the wizard catch him off guard, but there was no one there. The place was empty. It smelled of horse and was covered in dust. The ceiling sloped, and Sulrad had to bend down to keep from hitting his head on it. A bed was crammed into one corner beside an open-faced wardrobe containing only two sets of clothes. The wizard had no love of possessions. Perhaps if he hadn't been turned by Amedon, they could have been friends. Too bad he had already been convinced that Sulrad was evil and must die.

When no one returned, Sulrad took a seat. He'd wait. The wizard would return. This was his home, after all.

Sulrad had grown sleepy when a gentle popping signaled something had happened.

He opened his eyes to see the wizard appear from nowhere. He could use the void for more than spying, then. "Ah, there you are," Sulrad said. "I knew you'd be back, but I honestly expected you to use the door."

The wizard Zhimosom whirled to face him. Young and tall, the boy had the muscles of a farmer without the thickness. His hair was cropped short and his face clean shaven. He opened his hand, and a fireball appeared. No words, no gestures, just fire. Sulrad was impressed.

The fireball came at Sulrad with a force that almost too much to withstand. He dug for his magic. He had to act quickly. Bind the wizard, stop him from using his magic effectively, but how? He was too strong to take on directly. He had managed to counter every spell Sulrad threw at him. Magic was not the answer. There had to be another way.

"Hold on," Sulrad said. "I am no threat to you."

"You're in my room," Zhimosom said.

"Please. I beg you. Listen to me. I mean you no harm." Sulrad raised his hands as if to ward off an attack. Magic would be useless against one as strong as this, but he had another plan. All he needed to do was to keep this Zhimosom listening.

"Truly. I mean you no harm. Please. Listen to me. Please. Listen to me. Please. Listen to the sound of my voice. Listen to the way it rises and falls. Listen to the melody of my speech. Forget the words that I say. They are of no import. Listen to the sound of my voice. Listen to the tone of my voice. My voice is everything."

Almost before he knew it, Zhimosom was under his control.

"Where am I?" the wizard asked when Sulrad stopped speaking. "Who am I?"

"Your name is Zhimosom and you are my servant," Sulrad said.

"How did I get here? I was just in the copse of trees with Rotiaqua."

"What were you doing there?" Sulrad demanded.

"I don't recall." Zhimosom rubbed his hand where a fresh scar crossed his palm.

"Let me see that." Sulrad grabbed Zhimosom's hand. The scar was pink and raw, as if it had only healed recently. He probed deeper. Why the scar? What did it mean?

"How did you get this?" he demanded.

"We joined our blood," Zhimosom said.

"The baron's daughter and a stable boy?"

Zhimosom nodded.

Sulrad felt his magic well up in him to match his rage. This plowboy had joined this magic with the baron's daughter. But she was already blood bonded to him. Just what had happened? What did it mean? He let his magic flow into the scar. There were traces of power, but not only the wizard's. There was another, and so faint he almost missed it, yet another. Something had mingled its blood with the sorceress.

That was unexpected.

"What do you know of the sorceress?"

"We met through the fire," Sulrad said. "Come with me. I have more questions and I grow weary of this dreadful place." Sulrad considered using the void to take them both back to the temple, but he stopped himself. What if the spell came undone while they were in the void? Little was known about the void and less yet about what transpired when one crossed it. Better not to take any chances.

"You will follow me as if you were a beast on a rope, do you understand me?" Sulrad pressed his magic at the wizard to reinforce his commands.

"Yes, sire," Zhimosom said.
"Good. Stay close to me."



Sulrad took the wizard Zhimosom back to the temple and locked him in the room beside the altar. Let him try to escape from there. "Tell me. Who sent you?" Sulrad demanded.

Zhimosom blinked, his eyes closing slowly. "No one sent me."

"When were you last in Amedon?"

"I was never in Amedon."

"Who contacted you from Amedon?" Sulrad asked. "And don't lie to me, I know when you are lying."

"No one contacted me. I've never been to Amedon. I don't even know where it is."

"Come with me." Sulrad motioned to the wizard. "This way."

He led Zhimosom to the altar.

"Lie down."

Zhimosom took a step toward the altar, then stopped.

"I said lie down." Sulrad reinforced his mesmeric commands with magic. As the magic wrapped around the young wizard, it expanded. How was the boy able to maintain his shields even under such a deep compulsion? He must have tremendous power to resist. It gave Sulrad pause. If he were to take that power for himself, what wonders could he perform? Would it break Zhimosom's bond with Rotiaqua? Free her to join him?

"Lie down." This time, Sulrad used the magic of the crystals to supplement his own.

Zhimosom climbed atop the altar and lay down on his back, arms and legs extended.

Sulrad lashed him to the altar with the same heavy cords he used on the serving girl. He glanced at the bright sunbeam on the wall. Too bad he had plans for this young wizard other than just a sacrifice.

"Tell me of the baron's daughter. Has she been to Amedon? Did someone from Amedon contact her?"

"No. Neither of us has been there. We haven't spoken to anyone."

Sulrad sensed a seed of truth in Zhimosom's words, but there was more. Something he wasn't revealing.

Sulrad summoned up the pain that should loosen the wizard's tongue. "Procuat in dolore."

Zhimosom arched his back, muscles straining at the bindings.

"What are you hiding?" Sulrad demand.

"Nothing."

The wizard was strong, but everyone had their breaking point.

Sulrad intensified the pain. "Dolore magis."

Zhimosom spasmed, blood coming from the corners of his mouth.

Had he bitten his own tongue off?

Sulrad released the magic and examined the wizard. His tongue was still intact, though bloody and swollen.

"Aliquam," Sulrad commanded the pain to resume.

As Zhimosom struggled against the bindings, Sulrad used his magic to examine him. He was young, not more than a summer since his magic had awakened. He was poor, from a poor family, not cultured like the baron's daughter. Yet the boy possessed strong magic.

Sulrad examined that magic, looking for any traces of anything unusual. At first, it appeared to be nothing more than any other wizard, but as Sulrad dug deeper, he sensed more. The wizard was carrying the magic from a field animal, a mouse. Had the wizard discovered the same thing Sulrad had? How to take magic from a living creature?

Sulrad dug for that magic, looking for the memory of when Zhimosom had acquired it. The memory was deeply buried as if he were ashamed of it. The wizard *had* used his magic to kill a mouse. The boy had taken its magic and had immediately become overwhelmed with shame.

How charming.

The lad had compassion even for a mouse.

Perhaps he wasn't cut out for temple life after all. Sulrad could sacrifice him to Ran, end the threat from Amedon, and acquire more magic than he had ever imagined.

"Let's see what else you've been up to."

Sulrad dug deeper into the wizard's magic. He felt a faint sense of another. The sorceress, the baron's daughter, was there as well. Somehow her magic was bound together with the boy's. Did that mean taking the young wizard's life would give him access to Rotiaqua's magic? He had no idea. He wished he had access to the library at Amedon, but that was an old dream that had died long ago. Yet, if his memory served him, he did know something of what had happened. He had read of such as these two. A pair bonding between a sorceress and a wizard. Not only was their magic intertwined, their life force was as well. She was already bonded to him. Did that mean his life force was mixed with hers?

"You son of a dog. What have you done?" Sulrad screamed. "You've taken her!"

Sulrad paced the altar room. How had this happened? When had it happened? Rotiaqua and Zhimosom were bonded just as Alwroth and Uskin were bonded. But she was to be his.

"I'll kill you and have both of your magic." Sulrad placed the sky iron knife against Zhimosom's throat. "No one is taking her away from me."

He pressed the blade slowly into the young wizard's flesh.

Blood seeped out around the point.

The young wizard's magic rushed to the knife, but not just his. Sulrad sensed Rotiaqua's magic there as well. That meant that killing the wizard would also kill her. He didn't want that. Even though she had betrayed him, he still hoped she would come to share the temple with him. He had to separate their magic.

"Kill him. Take the magic for ourselves," a voice came from the shadows. It was Ignal. She had a way of appearing just when he needed her support the most, but it was disturbing that she could appear almost by magic at the most critical of moments.

"How long have you been there?" Sulrad asked.

"Long enough to know you are never going to separate his magic from hers." Ignal stepped out of the shadows into the pale light.

"If I kill him, she dies too."

"Can you take both their magic?" Ignal asked. "At the same time?"

"I will not kill her," he said. "She has done nothing wrong. She will be my priestess."

Ignal shook her head. "If only you thought of me that way. If I had magic, would you worry so about me?"

"If the temple is to grow, we need wizards and sorceresses, those empowered to do the will of Ran. You do a fine job running things, but we need healers and wizards to keep the folk coming back."

"What if she took the wizard's magic?" Ignal asked.

There was a tone in her voice that Sulrad had not often heard. She was angry with him. Was it because he still wished to recruit Rotiaqua to the temple? Was she jealous?

"If she took his magic, she would recover her own and absorb his," Ignal was saying. "Perhaps that's the way forward."

"Take his magic? She wouldn't do such a thing."

"But what if she did?"

“If she did, then she would be in possession of her own magic and his. Yes. She could survive that.”

He slammed his fist into the altar. “Curse those wizards for banishing me. I could so use access to the library in Amedon. There must be a safer way. I can’t take the chance of harming her.”

“What choice do you have? If she is to be a priestess, she will eventually need to make a sacrifice just as you did. Let this be hers. If she refuses, what have you lost? If she does as you wish, then you have indeed gained her trust and her partnership.”

“Ignal, you are wise beyond your years.”

She always had the right answer. Yes, This was the only path. He could get her to take the magic from Zhimosom. That would break the bond and restore her life force. It would take some doing, but it would be worth the effort. But first, he needed to get his hands on her.

ROTIAQUA

SULRAD

The next morning, Sulrad arranged a meeting with the baron. He stood outside the baron's private dining chamber awaiting admittance, fuming inwardly at being made to wait like a common petitioner. But at least he was being seen in private. What Sulrad had to say was something that could not be spoken of in front of others, lest the baron be pressed by the crowd to honor his word when Sulrad revealed Rotiaqua as a sorceress. He was fairly certain the baron would not put his own daughter to death, but once he knew the truth, he could not allow her to remain where she was. That baron would not kill his own daughter. He was much more likely to hand his daughter over to Sulrad than have her put to death. At least that was what he hoped.

When he was finally admitted, Sulrad stood before the baron and his daughter and explained that he had captured a wizard. He felt that this was a safe way to open the conversation. It would give the baron something to approve of in Sulrad's actions and remind him of his hatred of those who possessed magic. Once the baron was suitably prepared, Sulrad revealed what he had discovered about Rotiaqua, that she possessed magic and was a sorceress.

Sulrad tried to remain focused as he delivered his carefully prepared speech, but the voices in his head chose that precise moment to scream their accusations. Dark specters rose up in his imagination, fingers pointing at him, voices screaming accusations of murder at him, until he could barely perceive what was happening around him.

He almost missed it when the baron demanded that he be removed.

Things were not going his way. He had to act, and act he did. Almost out of habit. In a panic to do something to demonstrate his accusations, he raised fire, intending to frighten Rotiaqua into action. Before he knew it, the fireball was headed straight for her, the spinning ball of blue sparks shedding streaks of gold and red as it slowly traversed the space between his outstretched hand and the girl. He tensed. What if she was not prepared? What if her shields were not up to the task?

He reached out with his magic, but the voices inside him blocked it, laughing at him, taunting him, telling him how he had finally done something so foolish, that he would finally get what he deserved.

He swatted at the voices, breaking his concentration, but it was too late.

He tried to pull it back, but it was too late.

An echo in his head said it was all right. He would let the baron see that Rotiaqua had magic.

The fireball splashed against Rotiaqua's shields and shattered into uncounted fragments that dropped to the floor like water over a fall; the sparks cascading at the girl's feet and dying out in the space of a heartbeat.

The backlash from the exploding fireball ripped at Sulrad's head. It felt as if a giant ogre had grabbed his skull in its mighty arms and twisted. Sulrad put his hands out for balance, a haze of darkness threatening to cover his vision. He was barely aware of the baron and his advisors were arguing about the fate of the girl, or that he himself was

engaged in the discussion. It wasn't until he found himself halfway to the temple — the guards close behind him dragging the protesting Rotiaqua by the arms — that Sulrad began to think clearly.

He had won.

Rotiaqua was his. He would turn her into a priestess and together they would rule the land. Eventually, she would come to see that this was the way things were meant to be. Wizards ruled, not commoners with royal pretension. That was the way it had been in ancient times before the rise of Amedon, before the small group of self-righteous wizards had conspired with the dragons to take that right away from those born to rule, those born to wield magic.

Rotiaqua would see the truth of it. He was certain of it. But how to make her see? Force was no good. He needed a gentler approach, one of persuasion, education, enlightenment. She needed to come to the realization on her own that he was her path forward, even if it took him moons of quiet conversation. He was prepared to spend that time turning her into the perfect companion.

The guards took Rotiaqua to a room that looked more like a prison than a living chamber. When she saw it, she struggled. That would never do. He needed her calm and cooperative.

Sulrad dug for a spell he could use to calm her until he could properly prepare for her conversion. He was tempted to use the mesmeric arts on her, but Zhimosom had already broken through that and he was certain it would not work on her. Not for long. And he truly wanted her conversion. Not just a mind-numbed slave, but for now. She needed to be neutralized.

He carefully drew a set of symbols in the air with his finger, a faint green line remaining behind as his nail scratched upon an imagined blackboard. "Ut summo pacis ceciderit super te cito." He whispered the words of the

incantation, asking Ran to bestow the blessing of peace upon her.

Rotiaqua relaxed, her eyes glazing over.

Sulrad guided her to a chair in the main audience chamber. He was surprised at the effect of the spell on her. He had expected at least a minimum of resistance, but she was completely compliant.

"Sit," Sulrad urged her. "I will have a more suitable room prepared for you."

Sulrad pointed at one of the guards. "Let Ignal know that this is unsuitable for the baron's daughter. She is no prisoner here. I want this room properly furnished in the style to which the girl is accustomed."

The guard nodded but remained still.

Sulrad glanced over at Rotiaqua, who stood there silently. How could he have been so uncaring of one who was to be his closest associate? "Now!" Sulrad shouted.

"As you command." The guard bowed and rushed off.

"You were a bit harsh, don't you think?" Ignal appeared as if from nowhere.

"No more than he deserved." Sulrad grouched.

"He deserved none of that. Do you expect your staff to read your mind? Before you have even decided?"

"She deserves better. How am I to convince her to join me by placing her in a cell?" Sulrad asked.

"So you did not expect to succeed?"

"Of course I did."

"Then why did you not prepare her room beforehand?"

Sulrad drew a breath to rebuke Ignal, but as he did, he realized she was right. The woman had an uncanny ability to see right through him and into his soul. Perhaps she was more of an agent of Ran than even he was. Had Ran blessed her with this talent? Was she his hand when dealing with Sulrad?

"Maybe you are right." Sulrad took a seat beside Rotiaqua. The spell was holding. But it was taking a lot out

of him. How long could he keep this up? Hopefully, it would not be required for too long.

"It's understandable that you are a bit concerned," Ignal said. "I can help with the preparations. I've already requested that they retrieve the furniture from one of my guest rooms. I should have thought of it myself. That's why you keep me around, isn't it? To think of these things for you?"

"I keep you around because you remind me when I stray from Ran's path. I keep you around because you are wise. I keep you around because you calm me down when things go awry."

Ignal sidled up to him, pressing against him, her white robes rustling as she did. He felt the sky iron knife she had taken to carrying. She said it made her confident to know she had such power around her when he was not by her side. "Anything else you keep me around for?" she asked.

Sulrad felt his face go flush. Ignal had always been overly physical with him. He presumed that was just the way she was. Some folk drew great comfort from touching and being touched, others not so much. For Sulrad, touching had too often meant discipline and pain. He had steeled himself not to flinch when she touched him and even come to accept that this was her manner. In some ways, it comforted him, made him feel more connected to her, and through her to Ran, but this was different.

This was no motherly or sisterly touch. This was the way a woman touched a man she wished to garner favor with. He'd seen it often enough in Amedon when he'd frequented the taverns. Every so often, one of the serving girls took a fancy to a handsome traveler or a young boy who'd grown tall over the summer. Ignal's touch reminded him of the way those women behaved.

He glanced over at the diminutive woman he had come to rely on, almost like an extension of himself.

Her gaze was fixed on him, the lids of her eyes painted lightly in blue that accented the color of her eyes. The hood of her robe lay folded against her neck in the same manner her hair when long had lain across her shoulders. Her hand rested gently on his shoulder, strong fingers massaging the tension from his muscles.

Sulrad inhaled, catching the scent of lilac and honey. It was barely discernible, but it was there, so restrained, he almost missed it. That scent brought back memories. Memories of her gently caressing his head as she nursed him back to health. Memories of her being there when he needed someone to remind him that Ran truly favored him and that he was doing the right thing, and he would prevail. She had been there for him since the first day he'd met her, yet he'd never noticed the way she looked at him. It was as if she were a maid smitten with her first love.

It made him warm inside to think that he inspired those feelings in her.

He smiled to himself, allowing his thoughts to wander. What would it be like, he wondered, to possess such a woman? Would his inexperience put her off, or would she think it quaint? His thoughts pursued her like a lad after a maiden, but where those thoughts led, he knew he could not follow. She was not an innocent maid. She was a grown woman, and she was bonded in the eyes of Ran. She was not free to pursue him. He had made a solemn vow to Ran to possess no woman, father no child. What sort of punishment would Ran level at him for taking liberties with another man's bond-mate? Was he so weak that he could not put aside such a temptation?

He flinched at the thought. This was the sort of thing that brought out the voices inside him, the ones that taunted him no matter what he decided. But the voices were strangely silent. Perhaps Ran was trying to reassure him. Let him know that he was favored even in this action.

Sulrad stirred, reaching for Ignal's hand, but as his fingers came to rest on hers, a rustling sound beside him caught his attention.

Rotiaqua was stirring.

He halted.

She was to be his partner.

She had magic.

If there was to be one such as this in his life, it was Rotiaqua.

He let his fingers rest for a moment on Ignal's then squeezed. "Words cannot begin to describe the reasons I keep you around," he said. "Now tell me. How are we to turn this one into a priestess?" He jutted his chin toward Rotiaqua.

Ignal let her hand slide along his shoulder before stepping away.

"Ran will guide you if you but open yourself to him," she said.

As she sauntered away, he felt his mind wander back to its previous line of thought, and for a moment, he wondered if he'd made the right choice.

SACRIFICES

SULRAD

Sulrad pondered his dilemma thought the night. The baron had agreed to hand Rotiaqua over for training. He had disavowed her for her possession of magic. She was like Sulrad now. Shunned by her own blood for something she had no control over. But she was also his. He could turn her now. He had imagined that she would be glad to learn to control her powers just as he had been; instead, she disparaged everything he did. She hated the temple. She hated Ran. And most of all, she hated him. It had taken a bit of time to devise a spell that would contain her, but by the morning, he had it. He cast a spell on her that kept her submissive to his will, but maintaining that spell was taxing. Soon he would have insufficient magic to power it, and she would be free once again.

A knock on the door broke his reverie.

"That boy you purchased from the poor family is useless," Ignal spat. "He can barely even raise fire and can't remember anything I try to teach him. Basic figures to power the simplest of spells are beyond him. Why ever did you take him on?"

Sulrad had almost forgotten about the boy. A scrawny youth with his magic barely awakened in him. He had taken the boy from his mother in exchange for a few coins and

handed the youth over to Ignal to prepare him for service in the temple. He should have been learning magic by now, helping out with the healings. Perhaps with a bit more attention, he could still be made useful. "He has magic," Sulrad said.

"All he does is weep for his mother. He may have a touch of magic, but beyond that, he is no more than a peasant. He will never serve Ran in the manner you desire."

"Keep at it," Sulrad said. "Perhaps he will learn."

Ignal waddled over and climbed up on the chair beside Sulrad. She reached out her hand, touching his cheek. "This is not what we planned. The boy is ignorant. Worthless."

"There must be some use for him. As a servant?"

"You wish me to train him as a servant?"

"Why not?"

"We have plenty of servants. They are lining up to pledge their devotion to Ran and serve him however they can. I've been turning away acolytes on a daily basis."

"Any with magic?" Sulrad muttered. "I could use some magic."

"The boy has magic."

"You said it yourself. He's weak. He shows no promise at all, remember?"

"He is not suited to become a priest, but he has magic. You are running low. I can see it in you. Your face is thin. You look as if you haven't eaten in days. Your eyes are dark. What are you doing to yourself?"

"My magic grows weak. I am maintaining a spell that I wish had no need of, but I do, and it's taxing."

"Replenish your magic," Ignal said. "Take a life. Soak it up. I saw how Ran touched you when you did."

"Do you have another mini-dragon?"

"No, but I may have one soon."

"Soon may be too late."

"How about the boy?"

"The boy? Now you are talking against your own words."

"I am only thinking of you. The boy has magic. He has a life-force. Sacrifice him. Take his magic. That magic can save half a score of petitioners or more. Isn't that worth it?"

"I will not kill him. He has done nothing wrong. He doesn't deserve that."

"Are you planning on gathering these young wizards here? Who will feed them if they fulfill no purpose? First this young boy, then the other one, that Zhimosom, now the baron's daughter. What are you planning to do with them all?"

"Train them. Show them the path of Ran."

"But they are all agents of Amedon."

"Not the boy. He's not. I've tested him. The wizards have not corrupted him. He has not been in contact with Amedon."

"He has." Ignal's leg bounced as she spoke. "He has had the dream. He told me this morning of a wizard who visited him in his dreams and taught him how to shield himself."

Sulrad was curious. The lad had been reluctant to speak to him for some reason and he had given the boy over to Ignal to see what progress she might make with him. It appeared she had some skills in that area.

"Why did he tell you that?" Sulrad asked.

"I'm motherly and the boy is lonely. He thinks I will let him leave," Ignal purred.

"Where would he go?"

"To Amedon," Ignal said.

"What?" Sulrad jumped up. The boy *had* been contacted by the wizards of Amedon. They had cultivated a traitor in his midst. That could never stand.

"Bring him here," Sulrad said. He would remedy that without delay.

"Right away." Ignal rushed out to return moments later with the boy.

"Ignal tells me you have had dreams of a wizard," Sulrad said.

"Yes, sire," the boy said reluctantly. "A wizard comes to me in my dreams and is teaching me."

"What does he look like, this wizard?"

"He's old, older than my gran. He is tall and thin, with a short-cropped beard and short hair."

"Did he tell you his name?" Sulrad asked.

The boy nodded. "He said his name is Garlath. He said he is going to teach me a few spells and then I will travel the land and go to him in Amedon."

"So you plan to run away from the temple?" Sulrad demanded.

The boy's voice grew quiet. He picked at his hand as he spoke. "He said he was going to teach me spells. Then he would direct me to Amedon so I could learn more."

"Did he tell you to do anything before you left us?" Sulrad demanded.

"No, sire."

"Liar," Sulrad spat. "You are lying to me. He set you a task, didn't he? He told you to kill me, didn't he?"

"No, sire. No such thing."

"I know when you are lying." Sulrad summoned one of the men he had hired to be his temple guard. The man had the look of a soldier to him. He stood stiffly at attention, staff in hand, ready to do whatever Sulrad bid him.

"Take this one to the cell," Sulrad told the guard, shoving the boy in his direction.

"As you command." The guard nodded and dragged the boy off.

"See," Ignal said. "They have lured even one as young and inexperienced as this. They will stop at nothing to harm you."

"You are wise. I see it now. I can solve several of my problems at once." He turned to leave, calling out to her over his shoulder as he departed. "Prepare the altar room."

Tonight we are going to make a sacrifice to Ran that will open a fount of blessings, and if I am right, will teach a young sorceress her place in this world."



Just prior to sunset, Sulrad donned his priestly robes and called for Rotiaqua and the young peasant boy. He would take the boy's magic and use it to reinforce the spell he held over Rotiaqua and Zhimosom. He felt the transects slipping. The last thing he needed was a pair of traitorous wizards in his own house. Perhaps this display of power would help turn Rotiaqua? Could he get her to make the sacrifice? That seemed a bit premature. Perhaps just as a witness, then. She would see what he did. How he took the power to continue his work. Who wouldn't want access to that sort of power?

He escorted Rotiaqua into the altar room and paused. The power coming from the altar stones was palpable, if weakened. "I see you can feel it, can't you?"

Her gaze flicked to the altar, but she remained silent.

"You will see. Wait here while I go get the sacrifice." Sulrad pressed more magic into the spell that enthralled her and left her standing there as he stepped out to get the young peasant boy.

The guard handed the boy over to Sulrad. The lad was in such a daze, he had no idea where he was. That would not do. The lad would need to be awake for the sacrifice, aware of what was happening. Sulrad had found that a crucial part of taking the full power of someone's magic. The boy would need to confess so Rotiaqua would know the Sulrad had no choice but to terminate his life. She must know he was the enemy just like Zhimosom.

Sulrad nodded to the guard dismissing him and freed the boy from the spell he had been under.

It felt good to release the spell.

It was taxing, and Sulrad would need all his magic for what came next.

"What's happening?" the boy asked.

"You are to take part in a very special ceremony," Sulrad said.

He pressed a feeling of calm onto the boy and escorted him into the altar room.

Once inside, Sulrad turned to Rotiaqua to explain what he was about to do. The disgust was clear on her face. She struggled to turn her head away, but he held her there, reinforcing the spell with his dwindling magic.

He glanced at the sunbeam approaching the altar. It would be no more than a hand of heartbeats until the time of the strongest magic would be upon him.

He guided the boy onto the altar and trussed him there, soothing him with words and magic. After a while, the boy calmed down. When he was no longer struggling, Sulrad snatched the sky iron knife from the statue and slit the boy's throat.

He smiled.

"Confess," Sulrad said.

"Confess what?"

"Who sent you? Who taught you shields? Why are they trying to kill me? Are you in league with Amedon? Zhimosom? Tell me."

"Never," the boy said.

"Maybe a bit of pain." Sulrad passed his hand over the boy. He had practiced this spell. He would attempt to remove the boy's magic while he was still alive. It would be very painful.

"Tell me," he said.

"There is nothing to say."

Sulrad created the spell and pressed it against the boy.

It didn't work.

He was shielded.

That was it. The rage rose in Sulrad.

He grabbed the sky iron knife from the statue and plunged it through the boy's shields and into his throat.

There.

Another murderous agent of the wizards of Amedon dispatched, but there was no time to enjoy his revenge against the wizards of Amedon. A brilliant cloud of golden motes rose from the boy, threatening Sulrad.

"Lapidibius." Sulrad commanded the magic to fill the stones, but some of it came for him. He flinched at first. It was not his intention to take the boy's magic into himself, but he was running short. Why not?

The golden motes streamed into his chest.

The world around him expanded to infinity, the memories of the boy flooding into his mind all at once. It was too much to grasp. He had to slow it down. He struggled to maintain himself amidst the stream of memories. What if he lost control? Would the boy take over his body?

He panicked, rejecting the magic for half a heartbeat, but it was enough to regain his own sense of himself. He let the magic soak into him, fill him with its power. He drew a deep breath and turned to Rotiaqua. "Back to your room, Rotiaqua. Soon you will do the sacrifice. I have your wizard friend in my cell. It is you who will take his life and his magic. He's very powerful. He'll make a good addition to our growing reserves."



Sulrad spent more time thinking about how to turn Rotiaqua into a priestess than he should. He knew that. Why was she so intriguing to him? Was it because she was the first person he had ever shared the magical connection with? Maybe it was because seeing her had been the first time he had truly experienced magic. No matter; he simply

could not get her out of his head. He needed her to approve of what he did more than anything else. Why wouldn't she see that he only meant good for the common folk? Sure, he had taken a life, more than one, but he was only defending himself. She would see that. She would return to him. She had to. She would be his priestess yet.

He encouraged her to take a sacrifice, starting with a simple hare just as he had. She resisted at first, thinking he was asking her to sacrifice a wizard, but when she saw the animal, she cooperated. Not as willingly as he had hoped, but small compromises were what it was going to take to keep her moving in the right direction.

Within a few days, the magic he had taken from the boy was almost completely gone. Maintaining the spell on the wizard he still held in the cell as well as Rotiaqua was wearing him down quickly. He needed to recharge and soon, or else his hold on them would be broken. If only he had a chance to turn the wizard as well, but Zhimosom, despite his age, was quite firm in his convictions. He would never make a priest and, given the chance, would kill Sulrad without remorse.

A knock on the door announced the arrival of Ignal.

She bore a small box draped in dark cloth. "I've brought you a mini-dragon," she said. "One of the faithful. I promised healing for his daughter. She has palsy and fell into the fire. The whole side of her face is burned."

Sulrad winced. It would take more power than he wished to perform such a healing, a significant portion of the power that the mini-dragon would yield during the sacrifice.

"She is young. She was beautiful before the accident. You will make a great friend of her father. He has been resistant to our calling. But when the daughter fell into the flames, he took it as a sign that Ran was displeased with him. In the future, I expect he will become one of our biggest supporters." She folded her hands. "We still have much need of gold. The temple is coming along nicely, but

the biggest expenses are still ahead. We need people like this." She raised her gaze to meet his. "And he has paid dearly."

"Prepare the altar room. I will take the sacrifice tonight, and then I need to settle this mess with the sorceress and the wizard in the cells. It is taxing me more than it should. And it's distracting me from my real work."

"Why not sacrifice the wizard tonight? Surely that will give you more power than the mini-dragon. You can be rid of him once and for all."

"I've given the matter much thought. I know he deserves to die for his part in attempting to kill me, but I feel that Ran has another path for him. Rotiaqua and Zhimosom are bonded. I cannot separate them. If I can get her to take his magic, as you said, I believe I can be rid of him and she will be free to follow Ran. I need just a bit more magic, and then I can sway her. It feels so close."

"Why do you insist that she be your priestess? Is it because she was your first? Because she has magic? Why not one of the faithful? Why pursue someone who prefers not to be caught?"

Sulrad shrugged. He didn't want to explain.

"I feel this is the right thing to do," he said. "Can you not support me in this?"

This time, it was Ignal's turn to shrug. "If you believe that is the path, then that is the path, but consider what other roads might lead to where we wish to go. Not all paths have the same cost."

"I understand, but this feels right," he said. "The other paths frighten me just a bit."

Ignal approached and took her hand, drawing his face toward hers. She stroked his cheek. "Rest now," she said. "I will wake you when the altar room is prepared."

Sulrad shook off her touch and straightened. "No. I'll see to it myself. I've been remiss in my worship. Bring the mini-dragon and meet me there."

He paused a moment. Perhaps another lesson was in order. "Bring the baron's daughter too. I want Rotiaqua to witness this."

Ignal opened her mouth as if to speak but hesitated. Was she jealous of Rotiaqua? Was that the reason for her reluctance? Sulrad tried to formulate an explanation as to why Rotiaqua would need to be turned. She was a wizard in her own right. If Sulrad bonded with her, then the two of them together would be more powerful than either one alone. She could truly protect him from the wizards in Amedon like no other.

Before he could speak. Ignal bowed and said, "As you wish."

Sulrad made his way to the altar room. The stones called out to him. There was power there, but he hated to waste it. Who knew what he might need it for in the days ahead? Something was brewing. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

When he reached the altar room, Rotiaqua was already there. She stood beside the door in the daze he had grown accustomed to. Soon such a spell would be unnecessary. Either she would be his willingly or he would do away with her.

He lifted the spell that kept her enthralled, feeling the load on his magic lighten slightly. It was wearing on him, keeping her in such a state.

"Why do you despise me? We used to be such fast friends," he said.

"That was before I knew what you were."

"And I am?"

"A murderer. A magic thief. Filthy. No more than a swine that roots in the mud for the leavings of decent folk."

"And you're pure?" Sulrad asked. Did she even realize she had already taken the magic of another? It was clear on her. She had more than her own magic flowing through her veins, and yet she accused him of being base, little more

than an animal. How could he show her her own muddled magic? Through the sacrifice? What if she took the animal's magic? Would that help? Perhaps he would let her sacrifice the animal.

"I think you should perform the sacrifice. You have no compunction about taking a life, I presume."

"I'm not doing anything. You're a swine and I hate you."

Sulrad shrugged. "Suit yourself. You don't have to take the sacrifice to take someone's magic. I can force it upon you if I deem it necessary."

Before he could say more, Ignal arrived with the mini-dragon.

He gestured toward the altar.

"What are you going to do with that?" Rotiaqua demanded.

"Sacrifice it. Take its magic. You think you are so pure. You have the magic of a mini-dragon running in your veins. You're not the innocent you think you are."

Rotiaqua opened her mouth then stopped.

He'd struck a nerve.

"I'm not sacrificing anything," she said.

"Someday soon, you will change your mind. When you do, you will need to know how to take the sacrifice," Sulrad said. "Watch carefully. You already know the mini dragon has magical power, much like a wizard. Feel how I take its power for my own, how I integrate its magic into mine. You will need to know how to do this yourself. Soon you will perform a similar sacrifice and take the magic of the wizard. Then you will be a priestess of Ran and ready to join me as we build the temple into a force to rule the land."

He reminded her of the proper procedure for the taking of the sacrifice, recalling the words of the spell that bound the magic into the altar and allowed him to take some of it into himself. Perhaps if he directed some toward her as well, that would bind her to him.

When the sunbeam struck the animal, it began.

Magic rose from the beast, filling the altar room with a swirl of golden motes of power. Sulrad directed most of them into the altar crystals but accepted some of them into himself. Once again, the power expanded his mind, filling him with visions of a land where the sun was huge and red and two moons hung in the sky. A shimmering light appeared before him in the sky, as if a veil had been hung in the evening breeze. The images threatened to overwhelm him.

He pushed the magic toward Rotiaqua. Maybe when she had foreign magic herself, she would see the truth of it, but something odd was happening. It was as if his magic was gone.

He tried to withdraw the magic of the mini-dragon back to himself, but it too was gone.

He sank to his knees.

Rotiaqua ripped the knife from his hand.

He turned to see her step through a shimmering silver portal and vanish.

ESCAPE

SULRAD

It took a moment for Sulrad to recover his senses.
How dare she!

He drew magic from the stones, letting it fill him as he opened another portal through the void. This time, it was a lot easier to follow the sorceress than it had been to follow the wizard. He knew her so much better.

He stepped through the void and into the small copse of trees to find the sorceress Rotiaqua and the wizard Zhimosom standing together. They were stuffing Sulrad's knife into a pack.

"Behind you!" Rotiaqua called out.

The wizard spun on his heels facing Sulrad down, but Sulrad was prepared. "You didn't think you were going to get away that easily, did you?" He took a step toward the wizard. Before he had left, he had taken Ignal's sky iron knife, thankful that she kept it close.

Sulrad formed a binding spell, one that he had learned in Amedon but never had the chance to practice, one many times more powerful than he had used on either of them before.

He hoped it was effective.

The spell leaped from his hand and bound Zhimosom, drawing his arms tight to his sides.

Good, at least the power Sulrad had of the mini-dragon was helping him, but as he watched, the wizard flicked his fingers and the spell unraveled. How insolent. Where had the wizard learned that? Only in Amedon. Just more proof he was lying when he said he was never there. Even more reason to dispatch him as soon as he could.

Sulrad raised the knife and took a step toward Zhimosom.

The wizard raised his shields against Sulrad and held up his hands as if he could fend off the magical attack with his mere flesh, but still, it was working. The wizard's magic was strong. Perhaps Sulrad could draw it out of him before he killed him. That would help defeat any spells he might cast and might separate his power from Rotiaqua. No harm in trying.

Sulrad crafted the spell he used to take the free magic of a sacrifice and turned it toward Zhimosom. It had failed on the boy. Would it work now? Zhimosom was distracted. He had lowered his shields. Perhaps he had thought himself safe.

Sulrad pressed the spell at him, drawing his magic out.

It worked.

Zhimosom's magic separated from him.

Now.

Strike now.

Sulrad placed the knife against the wizard's throat.

But before he could execute the fatal slice, he was hurled to the ground.

How had the wizard done that?

His shields were broken, his magic separated from him. Where had he drawn power from to perform such a spell?

Sulrad had no time to think.

He charged the young wizard once more.

As his hands closed around the young wizard's throat, pain flared in Sulrad's back. He glanced behind him to see

Rotiaqua standing there, her hand on the hilt of the sky iron knife.

"Don't move," she said. She held the hilt of the blade against his flesh, the point deep in his back.

Sulrad felt his own magic separate from him. It was drawn into the sky iron knife and around the sorceress.

Was she trying to make a sacrifice of him?

"What are you doing?" Zhimosom cried.

"Saving your life," Rotiaqua answered. "Get over here and help me."

Zhimosom took the sky iron knife from the pack and stepped behind him. When the second blade entered Sulrad's back, it hurt no less than the first one had. He screamed in pain. His magic was wrenched from him even as he desperately tried to hold on to the smallest bit of it. He felt empty. Hungry. Alone and abandoned. The feeling of being abandoned and shunned came back to him in a rush. It was a horror to be completely without magic. He recalled those days. The days before the power came awake in him. He had been a coward then. A sniveling coward. No more. He was a man now. A wizard. He pushed away the disturbing thoughts and fought back, but he had failed. The gnawing emptiness grew stronger as the last of his magic separated from him, but suddenly, it returned with a force that almost hurled him forward. He was whole once more.

"We have to let him live." Zhimosom reached for the knife and pulled it from Sulrad's flesh.

"Why?" Rotiaqua stood firm, still holding her knife in Sulrad's back.

"Because he has your magic in him, and you have his in you. I can't separate them out." Zhimosom stepped back from Sulrad and folded his arms.

Sulrad laughed. He had gained access to Rotiaqua's magic when she healed him. Their blood had mingled. He and Rotiaqua were bonded no less than she and Zhimosom. How fortunate for him. Zhimosom could not kill him, but

then Sulrad could not kill either of them. How fitting that the three of them should be bound together by their common magic. It was ironic and fitting.

Rotiaqua withdrew the sky iron knife.

Sulrad crumpled to the ground.

"Don't think we won't kill you if we ever see you again," Zhimosom said.

Sulrad gathered his power around him and pulled himself across the void back to the altar room.

"Where did you go?" Ignal asked. "What happened to your back?"

She knelt down and pressed her hand against his wounds. It hurt like fire.

"You need a healer." She leaned him against the altar. "I'll go fetch one."

"No." Sulrad winced in pain. "I have magic enough to heal even myself."

"I thought you said that does not work," she said.

"It does not. A wizard cannot use his own power on himself, but I have access to more than my own." He drew power from the stones beneath the altar, forming the ghost glove he used for healing. It was hard work, but the power was refreshing as it flowed through him.

He probed within his own flesh.

It was odd to feel both the healing hand and the flesh it touched. He had never attempted to heal himself before, but it was working. He pinched the severed flesh together and willed it to knit itself back to a single whole.

The trickle of blood slowed, then ceased.

The room spun, then the world around him went black.



The following morning, Sulrad woke to the pleasant voice that had sung him to sleep. His mouth was dry. His head

ached. But his back no longer pained him.

Ignal had removed his robe and placed him beneath the blankets. She had changed into her white robes and brought a pungent ointment, which she rubbed on his back. "You have a nice pair of scars back here."

Sulrad paused to take stock, not only of his narrow escape but his whole life. He surveyed the room. The bed was soft, the canopy above it clean, as if it had just been washed. A rich red carpet covered the polished tiled floor. A set of matching chairs and tables sat beside a window that looked out onto the town. It was a far cry from the home where he had grown up. How had he let it come to this? He was no wealthy merchant who needed constant coddling by a staff of servants. Surely this was Ran's way of getting his attention. He was not meant for such a life as this.

"You escaped with your life," Ignal said. "That's a blessing. One to be thankful for."

He replayed the fight with Rotiaqua and Zhimosom. She still had his knife. Its absence was like a hunger. She was gone. She would never be his priestess. He knew that now. Seeing her that night in the fire had changed his life forever. How could they not be destined to be together? They could have built such great monuments to Ran, but he saw now that it was not to be. Ran didn't need help from the baron's daughter. Why hadn't he seen that sooner? Ran had chosen him. That was sufficient. Still, she had taken his most prized possession. The only thing he truly valued.

"She took my knife," he said.

"I thought you could call it to you. Is that not what you told me? That you fetched it from those infidels in the wizards' city?"

"I did." In his despair, he had forgotten.

"Well, do it again." Ignal hopped up on the bed beside him. She crawled over to his pillow and propped herself up on one arm, gently touching his cheek with her free hand. "You have Ran's blessing. You can do anything."

"Anything but kill the wizard."

"I'm certain you can accomplish even that if you wish."

"I no longer wish it." As he spoke the words, he felt a burden lift from him. The statue of Ran warmed against his skin. He had chosen the correct path, the one Ran had set out for him. The wizard and sorceress would live. They would never bother him again, and he could not threaten them either.

"Their magic is intertwined, and so is mine," he explained.

"How so? You have the power of Ran in you; does it run also in them?"

Sulrad turned his gaze to Ignal. He saw it now. She envied the way Sulrad had pursued Rotiaqua. She was jealous. How could he have overlooked that? But the sorceress was gone now. There was nothing for her to fear, yet a little reassurance would help allay her concerns.

"Not the power of Ran. My native magic. It's mixed up with theirs. If I kill them, I will suffer the same fate. In Amedon, I learned of the pair bonding. How a wizard and sorceress are bonded by their magic and share the same fate. Those two are bonded. I could feel it, but Rotiaqua also carries some of my magic, and that's mixed up in the bond. I fear that I am unable to remove them as a threat to my own safety."

"Surely there is something else you can do?"

Sulrad shrugged. "They are fleeing. I caught them on the outskirts of the city. They are on the run, and as far as I am concerned, let them run. I've neglected Ran's work long enough." He touched his back, his finger gently tracing the pink scar. "Ran allowed this to happen to me, to remind me that his work comes first. Not some sorceress or wizard. He is angry with me that I have not been diligent about bringing his word to the people. I must return to that."

"So what will you do?"

“Build the temple. Serve the people. Recruit more priests and acolytes.” As he spoke the words, Sulrad felt the power of Ran stir inside him. This was his path. He knew that. He had simply needed to be reminded of it.

Let the wizards of Amedon come after him. He would deal with them when they did, but until then, Ran had work for him, and that was where his focus was meant to be.

““I need to focus on Ran and his word. I’m done with the sorceress. You will be my high priestess. I was foolish to ever think otherwise.”

A broad smile spread across Ignal’s face. “I have studied many things, and this, I know for certain. Those scars.” She shifted toward his back and traced her finger along the scars, goose flesh raising on his arms as she did. “These are assassin’s targets.” A gentle finger re-traced one scar. “A person might survive one, but both? Always fatal. Not right away, but it is unavoidable.”

She sat upright, crossing her legs beneath her white robes. “Yet, you survive and will continue to do so. I have seen Ran’s hand of healing on you. These wounds are clean and well on their way to healing when anyone else would be slowly dying, if not already dead.”

“It certainly doesn’t feel like a blessing.”

“It is. And you still have Ran’s favor.” Ignal raised her hands. “Show me. Call your knife back to you. You will see that Ran still looks favorably on you and your work.”

“Now?”

“Now.” She bowed her head and closed her eyes.

Why not? He closed his eyes and envisioned his knife, calling to mind each swirl in the blade, each strand of cord that he used when wrapping the tang, each knot he tied to create the intricate design of the handle. He stretched out his hand, ready to receive it.

The world wrenched beneath him for just a moment and then returned to normal. The weight in his hand told him he had been successful.

“See. Ran always favors you.” Ignal grabbed the knife from his hand and jumped off the bed. “I’ll put this in the altar room. I’ve heard rumors of yet another wizard the vile demons of Amedon have been protecting in this city. His magic will make a great addition to the temple stores.”

Before Sulrad could respond, she was out the door and gone, leaving him on his own.

Another wizard?

How many were there?

Would he ever be safe?

FOCUS

SULRAD

The crowd packing the temple had grown as the spire rose into the sky. Gold flowed like water, and the number of infirm that had been healed was beyond counting. Sulrad glanced up at the spire that Ignal had said would bring people's thoughts to Ran whenever they saw it. It did just that, but it also had another purpose, one that was not disclosed to any but those who had dedicated their lives to the service of Ran and his temple, and in a moment, that purpose would be fulfilled.

Sulrad was just in time to witness the sunrise.

It was his favorite time of the day.

As the first rays of the new day caught the tip of the spire, the sunlight was channeled into the depths of the temple where the newest priest was about to be initiated. It was a task Sulrad had never taken much pleasure in and had since delegated to his underlings. Invoking pain seemed an integral part of securing the magic of the faithful, a test not everyone survived. Despite his best efforts to construct shielding for the altar room, Sulrad felt the waves of pain as the latest acolyte was initiated into the mysteries of Ran and the temple. He shuddered. He no longer had the stomach for such a task. These days, his time

was spent in quiet contemplation as he codified the laws Ran had revealed to him. That was his true passion.

Although, lately, he spent too much time squashing minor squabbles between the priests and priestesses he had recruited. That rankled him. There should be none of that, but the more people he brought on to the temple staff, the more infighting there was. He reminded himself once again that he would need to do something about that. Perhaps the expansion of the temple *was* the thing that would quiet the squabbling down a bit. He could send the more aggressive staff out into the unconverted lands and let them build their own temple. That would keep them occupied. He made a mental note of that too and mused that there were too many mental notes that needed attention, and too many of them were urgent.

At times, Sulrad wondered how he had gotten so far from his humble roots. Ran was indeed beneficent, and he had richly blessed Sulrad. No more hovel for Sulrad. No trapping hares in the sparse woods and settling for roast root vegetables when his traps failed. Life had indeed grown better for him, made him soft. The temple had special quarters for him and Ran's faithful, and despite his misgivings about the trappings of wealth, he was growing accustomed to the lavish lifestyle.

A hand grasped his.

He was fortunate to have her. Why had he ever thought Rotiaqua could take her place? Ignal was truly worthier of Ran's beneficence than the sorceress would ever have been. He knew she desired more from him, but that was not to be. He would take no bond-mate, father no children, partake in no relations with a woman, yet there was a place for her. She was his right hand, his steadying force. He leaned on her emotionally. He depended on her. He would make an effort to treasure her whenever he could that he cared deeply for her. He squeezed her hand in response. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

"It sure is, half a stone of sky iron plated in gold," Ignal replied.

"Not the spire, the sunrise."

"That too." She squeezed his hand and pulled him closer to her. "It's time. I can feel it."

Sulrad paused and searched his heart. They had had this discussion so often as of late. She was right. He had grown complacent. After the last battle with the wizard and sorceress, things had quieted down. The unspoken truce he enjoyed with Amedon seemed to have put a stop to the never-ending flood of wizards and their attempts on his life. Perhaps it *was* time.

"Ignal, you are right. It is time. Time we took the word of Ran to others. After all, Frostan isn't the only city in the land that's in need of his guidance and his beneficence. Schedule a gathering of the priests for the morrow. We've accomplished so much here, but it's not enough. I won't rest until everyone in the land has heard of Ran."

As if saying the words out loud had triggered some magic he hadn't known he possessed, a feeling washed over him that this was the right thing to do. The statue of Ran that he still wore around his neck grew warm against his flesh, a sure sign that Ran was pleased with his words and his thoughts. As the temple rose from the bare earth, the statue had transformed itself from a roughly cut figure to a grizzled old man into the image of a true god. Fine details were revealed. Ran now wore the same robes as Sulrad did. Was that what Merten had intended when he first carved it? That it become the conscience for his wayward son? What would Merten think of his son now?

He slipped the statue back inside his shirt. The face of Ran was still roughed out and crude.

The expansion of the temple had begun.

He had work to do.

EPILOGUE

GARLATH

Garlath let the songbirds fill his ears with their calls as the breeze brushed through his loose hair. The potion he had taken to calm his nerves had left a bitter taste in his mouth. He tried to clear it with a stalk of lemon grass plucked from the side of the path while waiting for Alwroth to arrive. When he finally did, the ancient wizard simply said, "Let's take a walk."

But they hadn't taken a walk. They stood on the rich expanse of lawn that formed the courtyard in front to the council building overlooking the precipice that dropped away from the edge. It never failed to set Garlath's stomach on edge. It was as if the abyss was ready to reach out and swallow him where he stood.

"I failed," Garlath said. "Sulrad lives. He is bonded to the wizard and the sorceress. They are no longer suitable to rule Amedon. The wizard Sulrad remains in Frostan, and now he has the blessing of the baron. It would take an army to remove him."

"Ah, the shortsightedness of youth," Alwroth said.

"They're young, I know, but I fail to see your point."

“Not them. You.” Alwroth laughed.

Garlath was taken aback. “I’m hardly young.”

“You are by comparison to me.” Alwroth placed his hand on Garlath’s shoulder. “I set you the task of great import. It is something Uskin has foreseen. We knew there was another pair destined to take power soon. We are growing old and feel it in our bones. Without the young Zhimosom, that pair would have been Sulrad and Rotiaqua.” He paused to let his words sink in. “Can you imagine one such as Sulrad driving the council of Amedon for the next generation?”

Garlath shuddered.

“Precisely. What you have done is to create a pair bonding that we can trust. And you neutralized the greatest threat they will face. With Sulrad bonded to the two of them, he cannot threaten them. They will be safe from his interference no less than if you had dispatched him. You have effectively neutralized the most powerful wizards of the generation. They were destined to wage a war like never before seen in Amedon, but you stitched them nicely together so that no one may overpower the other. I’m quite impressed.”

“I only hope you’re right.” As he uttered those words, Garlath had a sinking feeling that he was missing something important.

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